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Prince of Persia

Part One: "The Sands of Time"

The first book of the fantasy novel-trilogy tells the story of a young prince, heir to the Persian throne and an outstanding warrior, who, together with his father, went to war with India. By a fatal mistake, he unleashes the deadly Sands of Time, captured in the palace of an Indian maharaja. In an instant, the familiar world collapses, and the hero will have to deal with incredible opponents and a powerful element.

The enemy of my enemy is my enemy.

Chapter 1. Heir

The stone crumbles and turns into sand. Water dries up or is absorbed into the ground. The sun's fire is extinguished one day and turns into a lifeless wind that does not warm - there is no life in it. He is only free to scatter sand whirlwinds across the vast expanses. A huge freedom that costs nothing. And what will become of us? We will all become Ghosts and go back to where we came from. And only Time will remain...

Many people think that Time is a river that carries its waters in one direction. But I can assure you: they are mistaken. Time is an ocean embraced by a storm, it is a powerful and indomitable element. I have seen the true face of the time, and I can tell you a story the likes of which you have never heard before!

Dawn... The sun, joyfully playing with its rays, began to slowly creep out of the horizon. The coolness of the night went somewhere far away, there, behind the dunes. The city began to gradually recover from sleep. People appeared on the streets. It was impossible not to pay attention to the greatness of this city: it occupied a huge area; The walls surrounding and guarding the city were so high that the night seemed even longer than usual to the people who lived near them. The name of this city is Babylon.

First, the sun lit up the top of the palace. This tall, gabled building inspired some incomprehensible feeling: either fear or trembling admiration. Gradually sliding down, the sun's rays revealed the entire building of the royal palace. On ordinary days, no one except the servants paid attention to the dawn. At such an early hour, none of the dignitaries even thought of waking up. But today was a special day. In the large halls of the palace, someone's joyful exclamations and shouts were heard, echoing them to its most remote corners. Today, Shahraman, the king of the Great Persian Empire, finally has an heir.

Zoroaster, who had the title of "the king's eye," took the boy in his arms and said:

"Nice boy," and after a moment's thought, he added, "he's going to change this world..."

It is not known why, but no one paid attention to his words: perhaps due to the general fuss, but rather due to the fact that no one had listened to him for a long time, considering Zoroaster an eccentric old man. But here's the strange thing: when he took the

inconsolably crying boy in his arms, for some reason he fell silent. He only continued to twitch with his small hands and once grabbed the elder's beard so that he even groaned from surprise.

In general, to people who did not know Zoroaster, he might have seemed strange. Some said that he was from India, and others said that he was a traveling wanderer who once wandered into Babylon. It is not known what sent him on his wanderings throughout the East, but on his face there were traces of an old wandering life. However, it has changed a lot since then. He had not left Babylon for several years and held an honorable position under the king. His lean and elongated face, covered with deep wrinkles, had an unnatural brownish color. Thick gray eyebrows and beard betrayed a deep old man in him. But most of all, his eyes were striking: it seemed that they burned with red fire, as if someone was illuminating them from the inside. His gaze frightened and resembled the look of a living dead. The eyes themselves were surrounded by black spots, gradually turning into facial wrinkles, rays radiating from the eyes. Most of the head was hidden under a red turban with the end hanging down from one side. But his appearance did not correspond to his character at all. He was a good-natured old man who had never done harm to anyone. The only thing that everyone disliked him for was that he was terribly fond of telling all sorts of stories, which, of course, no one believed and which no one listened to to the end at all. His favorite tale was the story of a certain Magaraj and his journey for the Sands of Time. But this story was so long that it disheartened everyone, and Zoroaster had to fall silent, not telling even a third of his story, after which the most interesting began. Therefore, no one even knew what kind of Sands of Time they were. And over time, even Zoroaster himself began to gradually forget this story and all its details, which he once told so energetically. And even more so, he did not even suspect that this story would continue.

The Little Prince grew up without a mother. He was told all the time that she had died of an illness shortly after his birth. As a child, he saw little of his father: he was constantly busy commanding his army and empire. And the little Prince remembered how his father returned victorious every time, he was joyfully greeted, honored and called the greatest king. And deservedly so, not a single battle was lost under him. And in every battle he participated himself, always with the same sword. He himself believed that it brought him good luck, and almost never parted with him.

Waiting for everyone around him to disperse, the Prince ran out to his father, trying to be as quiet as possible, and at the very last

moment tried to scare him, pretending to be an enemy. Shahraman turned around, grabbed his sword and said:

"Defend yourself!"

And then he always laughed kindly and hugged his son. And this always delighted the Prince. His father was an ideal for him. The boy dreamed of growing up as soon as possible and becoming like him. To earn the same honors in battles and to glorify your name. To become a great warrior like his father. And the same wise and worthy ruler when the time comes.

He wanted to learn this secret, thanks to which his father always manages to look cheerful even after long wars and campaigns. Instead of resting, he always went for a walk with the little Prince in the gardens that grew around the palace, and told him for hours about how they fought hordes of enemies, besieged and captured cities. And the Prince believed that his father and his army always did the right thing, that the enemies deserved to be defeated. And that his father would always be the winner. And so did he.

Zoroaster was the Prince's teacher. Despite the latter's restlessness, the old man still managed to teach him to read and write. Sometimes he even managed to interest the boy when he told something special, something that the Prince was not used to, or something that he did not understand, but which sounded intriguing to the child's mind. And then he stopped thinking of him as a dull and boring old man. Especially the little Prince was struck by the fact that not all people speak the same language. He was unshakably sure that everyone spoke and thought in exactly the same words as he did. And suddenly it turned out that this was not the case at all.

- And then how do people understand each other? Or are they fighting because they don't understand? The Prince then asked the teacher.

"They learn foreign languages on purpose. And that's not why they're fighting," Zoroaster answered.

"And how is it - a foreign language?" Can you say something in a foreign language? The boy did not calm down.

"Of course," said Zoroaster, and said in Indian: "You would always be so curious, young Prince!"

The boy's eyes widened in surprise. This strange speech was not at all like what he was used to hearing.

-What does it mean? Say it again! he said.

Zoroaster repeated his words, this time more extended and fluid, which made his speech sound truly mesmerizing to the Prince.

"You should be so curious more often," the teacher explained, and added another sentence in Indian: "Especially when you're learning to write."

The prince looked at him inquiringly and asked:

"And this?"

"Especially when you're learning to write," the old man translated.

- In which country do people say that? The boy could not stop asking.

- In India. It is the Indian language," Zoroaster answered.

-India? And what kind of country is it? Where is she? What kind of people are there? What do they look like? The prince continued to bombard the old man, who was tired by evening, with a stream of questions.

He smiled kindly and said:

"At the age of six, you want to know so much!" You should have been born a traveler, not a prince.

Instead of asking the next questions and demanding answers to the previous ones, he suddenly began to think. This idea, accidentally expressed by Zoroaster, firmly settled in the child's mind, and now the Prince's imagination drew extraordinary pictures in which he saw unknown countries, wonderful animals, unusual people. Although he had no idea what it could all look like. But the lack of impressions, strange as it may seem, can give rise to wonderful images, which, together with children's imagination, turn into whole worlds.

Zoroaster at this time was answering the Prince's questions. In general, he loved to tell stories and especially loved when people listened to him at the same time.

"I was born in India, but it so happened that I came to Persia and began to serve your father. India is far from here, you will have to get there for several days on horseback. There are many forests and rivers there. People there look almost the same, but they have darker hair and a slightly darker skin.

"Say something else!" I love this Indian language so much! The prince broke away from his dreams and began to pester Zoroaster again.

He pronounced the word "jug". It was the first thing that caught his eye. And, anticipating a new stream of questions, he said:

-Jug. I said the word "jug".

The prince frowned uncomprehendingly.

"Why call the jug so strange?" After all, this is a jug! Why was it necessary to invent all this?

"All peoples cherish their language. Each of them appeared a long time ago, when you, your father, and even me did not exist yet. Even this city did not exist yet. After all, excuse me, but animals

speak their own language, don't they? Zoroaster patiently explained. His patience was truly boundless, and he was able to tell or explain anything to the Prince for hours, only occasionally sighing from fatigue.

"They're stupid and don't understand what people tell them. Are people in India just as stupid? The Prince asked again.

"If you don't understand someone or they don't understand you, it doesn't mean that one of you is a fool. After all, the thoughts and feelings that a person wants to convey are important. And therefore, even a stupid animal will understand a loud frightening or angry cry, and a person who does not know the language will distinguish good words from evil ones," the teacher explained.

Now Zoroaster was even glad that their conversation had flowed into this direction. He could, unbeknownst to the Prince, share a piece of wisdom with him.

"And in the end, a different language will help you see things differently," he added.

"What does it mean to look at things differently?" The Prince asked thoughtfully and uncomprehendingly.

"When you grow up, you'll understand," Zoroaster muttered under his breath. "When you grow up, you'll understand.

Upon receiving such an incomprehensible and incomprehensible answer, the Prince quickly forgot about the question itself. And the interest in his eyes immediately began to fade. Seeing this, Zoroaster, feigning great fatigue, said:

"It's late, go to your room!"

All this time, the Prince was with Zoroaster, who lived in one of the remote corners of the palace. The boy involuntarily remembered the piles of books everywhere, stacked this way and that, and the huge number of candles that lit up the room. He even loved this twilight, loved to watch dozens of lights, and he liked the smell of melted wax.

When the Prince grew up a little, his life became more diverse. Instead of spending all his time with Zoroaster, he began to learn the trade of war. Shahraman entrusted these activities to his main combat commander or studied with the boy himself. As a child, the Prince refused to pick up a bow, believing that it was unfair. It is difficult to imagine where such an idea came from in the child's head, but he preferred a fair fight with an armed enemy. Although instead of the enemy, a training scarecrow often appeared, and instead of a sharp blade - a simple wooden sword.

The prince quickly chose his battle tactics. He didn't like what others showed him, and he always came up with something of his own. He believed that in a fight, the weapon is not only the sword, but also his body and mind. His movements were distinguished by dexterity and at the same time cold sharpness. There was no childish clumsiness, there was no fun during training. But there was a pleasure in the fight.

Then, when he trained with a living person, he began to bring even more of his own ideas. Often, falling asleep, he tried to come up with something new, something unexpected that would help him become an even more skilled warrior.

Tuammak, the Prince's martial teacher, was often unable to deal with a young opponent due to his agility. Of course, if the battle was real, then an adult warrior would easily defeat the boy. But the Prince was his apprentice, so Tuammak treated him very differently.

And the Prince took everything extremely seriously, although he understood perfectly well that this was not a fight to the death. But he couldn't afford to make mistakes. And in order to take his teacher by surprise, he often performed all sorts of tricks. For example, he dodged a blow by squatting sharply and hitting his legs, or rolled under his feet and put a sword on the back of the person he was fighting. The prince regretted that during training there was nothing to use nearby: no walls, trees, or anything like that. As well as fighting not only with a sword, he preferred to move not only on a flat surface, but also liked to climb all kinds of obstacles or climb trees. At the age of eight, he felt almost invulnerable, able to defeat anyone and get anywhere.

The prince tried not to show all this to his father. He believed that one day he would have to fight with the king shoulder to shoulder, and then he would truly prove himself. Everything unusual that the Prince has come up with will make an impression on him. However, he did not enjoy his time with his father and his stories of distant lands and heroic battles.

Chapter 2. An old friend

One day, when Shahraman was in Babylon and was walking in the garden with the Prince, one of the servants came up to him and said:

"Your Majesty, a messenger from Sultan Azad has just arrived and said that he will be here in the evening.

"Oh, excellent! I haven't seen my friend for a long time! Post your guard on the high lookout tower at the gate and let me know when it is very close. I want to meet him in person.

"Yes, my lord," replied the servant.

"Yes, and prepare my fine horse." And tell the combat commanders about the arrival of Rifat," Shahraman added.

The servant nodded slowly, indicating that this would be the way it would be done, bowed, and hurried away.

"Today, son, I will introduce you to my old friend. We used to go hiking with him, but then something happened and he stopped fighting. He settled in his palace. Azad is a wonderful city, I have been there. Perhaps you can even understand why Rifat does not want to leave him once again. Someday you will definitely visit there! The Sultan's palace has a great menagerie! Shahraman told the Prince.

He looked at his father with undisguised admiration and even gratitude. He would very much like to visit the Sultan's menagerie. He imagined some wonderful animals that he had never seen. And he didn't care much about some of his father's friends. His father is already the best. He doesn't need friends. Although this time the case was special.

In the evening, Shahraman put the Prince on his horse in front of him - the boy was still too young to handle an adult mount alone - and, surrounded by guards and military commanders, they headed for the gate of the goddess Ishtar - the most important and largest of the paths leading into the depths of the city. And the most extraordinary, magnificent and fascinating. At least, that was what the Prince thought, as he stared at the gate every time he happened to be close.

The gate seemed huge to the boy. They grew from the high walls surrounding the city, were painted blue and decorated with images of various animals. To the prince, these images seemed almost alive, he always wanted to touch them. And he always regretted that this could not be done, and that he was at the gate rarely and for a very short time.

The gates opened, and travelers appeared, approaching the walls of the city. A crowd of poor people, consisting mainly of children, ran after them, shouting something loudly. For them, what was happening was also an important event. But not at all because Rifath was a friend of their king. Because in such a turmoil and confusion it was quite easy to steal something valuable. Although the risk of getting caught was also great.

The prince did not wait at all for the appearance of Rifat himself among this crowd, he was almost indifferent to him and he slowly began to dislike him for stealing his father from him, even if only for a few days. It seemed to the prince that Shahraman already spent too little time with his son. And now he will surely be sent to the boring old man.

But when among the approaching guests he saw a small plump body swaying awkwardly on the back of the horse, the Prince's attention involuntarily switched to him. It was hard to imagine how he got into the saddle at all. And the Prince forgot about his dislike at once. The sight of Rifat made him laugh. He tried to imagine him with a sword in his hands, the commander of the army in battle, and he laughed even more.

But it also seemed to the Prince that Rifat exuded some kind of weakness. He didn't know how to really get angry. And the Prince felt in him this softness, this weak character. Not at all like his father's.

"Greetings, Rifat!" What brought you to Babylon? The Tsar spoke.

"Bad news. I need your help," the Sultan answered.

-What happened? Shahraman asked, already surprised.

"Raids on the border with India have become too frequent. Our outposts are constantly under attack. This threatens a real war! And you know, I have not been connected with the military craft for a long time.

Now even Shahraman noticed that Rifat had changed since their last meeting: he had grown old, plump, and somewhat fearful.

"This is really serious, we need to discuss everything in private. I'll show you my pride - hanging gardens. A great place for any conversation. I love spending time there with my son. By the way, here he is," Shahraman gestured to the Prince sitting in front of him. "My son, heir to the throne. My future hero!"

The last words had an incredible effect on the Prince. His father had never called him a hero, even a future one. Does it mean that he really believes in him, considers him worthy of being his son? The prince did not doubt it too much, but only because he did not think about it at all. And now new horizons opened up to him, although he perceived everything in a completely childish way. When such encouraging words came from his father's lips, the Prince swore to

himself that he would certainly meet all his expectations and even exceed them. This desire looked especially vivid against the background of Rifat. The prince did not notice how the contrast between his father and the sultan intensified his own thoughts, giving the images that arose in them exaggeration and scale.

Rifat, hearing about the wonderful gardens, somehow hurried and started off in the direction of the palace - it was visible from the very gate, because they were connected by a wide and perfectly straight road. The Sultan clearly felt safe here. And even the crowd of poor people chasing him and his escort was left somewhere behind, behind the gates and instantly disappeared from his memory. On the way to the palace, his attention was completely absorbed by the most magnificent and tallest building in the city - a huge tower that looked a little like the trunk of a giant tree growing out of the rock. But only trees without branches and foliage. He imagined how magnificent the same tower would look in Azad. It looked even more beautiful than his beloved Tower of Dawn, into which he had moved his treasury, which was in fact the most impregnable and well-protected part of his city. But this stone splendor was beyond all praise of which the Sultan was capable. And it seemed to him that there was nothing more impregnable. Excessive delight at the sight of everything unusual and curiosity are the hallmarks of Rifat. And the most important thing was that he also wanted to get a lot of what he saw.

When Rifat and Shahraman finally reached the hanging gardens, each of them began to look around, but each in his own way. Shahraman, seeing his friend's delight, looked at them with special pride, and Rifat was simply discouraged by the majesty and beauty of the place in which he found himself. The gardens did not have any special, ornate entrance, because they were already the best decoration of the entire palace.

The grass seemed to be particularly soft and lush. Special paths were laid everywhere so that people would not spoil it. It seemed that there was only greenery, bright flowers, sun and sky around. Even the great Tower of Babel seemed to be lost sight of. Magnificent fountains and spacious rotundas were placed in the garden, entwined with bizarre plants, the ends of which hung low to the ground, which made it seem that all this was entirely the creation of nature, and not of human hands. In the midst of all this, there was no place for anger, evil, wars. Only serenity and tranquility, disturbed only by a light breeze and sunlight. Even Rifat's eyes, burning with greed, seemed simply full of admiration and admiration for the triumph of nature.

And this was just the beginning. Going deeper, Rifat found that the gardens were turning into a whole green city: everywhere there were small houses, the roofs of which were supported by mighty white columns and were turned into islands of greenery. They were planted with all kinds of flowers and herbs, some of which also hung down, and some stretched towards the bright sun. Palm trees and ferns grew everywhere. They were planted in neat groups and did not seem superfluous anywhere. That is why everything was in perfect harmony. The man was not superfluous here, but he seemed to be present with someone's permission. The city grew and became a huge single building, here and there decorated with columns of white marble, statues of people and animals, round lakes, from which there was a breath of freshness. Stairs ran in all directions, some small, others larger, leading into the depths of the gardens. They consisted of several tiers and amazed with how man-made stone buildings merge with streams of greenery into a single living organism and become similar to wildlife. Everywhere you could find benches specially arranged in the shade of large trees. They were great for resting and even taking a nap while sitting on them. Along all the roads there were canals with water - it was brought here directly from the Euphrates River, which closely adjoined the city.

"I see that you like this place very much?" Shahraman broke the silence.

-Oh yes! These gardens... They're great! Rifat said, paying no more than a quarter of his attention to the words. As for the rest, he was completely absorbed in the contemplation of natural splendor, strikingly different from anything he had ever seen before.

"You can walk here for hours. Great place. When I return to the city, I strive to get here as soon as possible," Shahraman said at length, with pleasure.

He really loved these gardens, as if he drew from them peace for the soul, peace, kindness and faith in the best. He seemed to merge with them when he was here, imagining himself as a huge tree with its roots around the entire garden. That is why he looked at the rest of the world in a completely different way from that of a king, without much cunning or calculation. And in all his words and deeds there was no evil or black designs. He sincerely believed in what he was doing, in what he was saying. And it so happened that almost everything happened exactly in accordance with his thoughts. Therefore, he often did not notice bad traits in people. And not only in others, but also in yourself. All the wars he unleashed did not seem unjust to him, he did not see any robbery in them and always believed that he was doing the right thing and his victories could not be anything else. Perhaps that was why he was an excellent warrior - because he did not doubt himself for a second. And he knew mercy.

He was not a murderer. He was a glorious warrior who earned honor for himself and his country in battle. Therefore, he could not notice his mistakes or unfair actions.

Rifat was not like that at all. With his greed, he was always looking for an opportunity to get something in his collection. Heroism and courage were almost alien to him. He also cared a lot about his greatness, about his honor. But it was rather ostentatious and far-fetched, conditioned only by his position. And for all this, he was rather stupid and was more of a darling of fate than a real sultan who could deal with the enemy's raids himself. However, it was not always so. Once he really was a real ally of Shahraman, helped him in his conquests and border protection. But even then, Rifat constantly remained in the shadow of Shahraman, not distinguished by initiative and heroism. Nevertheless, together they reached almost the border of India, but stopped there: the forces were equal and the outcome of the war could not be in their favor. Agreements on new borders were reached during the negotiations, and from then on Rifat remained in Azad, the capital of his country, Bactria, which was located north of the new border. Rifat was faithful to his duty: Shahraman entrusted him with the protection of these lands, and therefore he always kept several rotating garrisons along the borders. But he himself began to retire more and more, only nominally controlling the situation. He turned into an old and cowardly collector. He was lucky: from the north he was protected by mountains, from the west there was friendly Persia, and his eastern neighbors did not violate the borders. And he was very satisfied with this state of affairs. A real gift of fate! Rifat was too cowardly to encroach on the power of Persia, and chose other tactics that promised him, though not so great, but still more than what he could have achieved alone. That is why a fairly strong union has developed between them, which over the years even really began to resemble friendship. In any case, the Persian king considered them friendly, because he still knew Rifat's father, and even then there were no clashes between their countries. And all this was inherited by him along with the beautiful Azad, a real pearl of those lands.

"So you want my army to help you deal with these raids?" Shahraman asked.

-Yes. And my advisor said it wasn't just raids. They can be the beginning of a big war against our countries. First India will smash Bactria as smaller and weaker, and then challenge Persia! Rifat replied with an intelligent look, trying to seem as serious and restless as possible. The reason for everything was the same cowardice of the sultan. He was satisfied with a quiet life, the only decoration of which were mountains of all sorts of trinkets, jewelry, expensive gifts and

strange dreams. He did not want to solve all the problems on his own. And friendship with the Persian king is such luck!

But Shahraman did not notice this at all and was even glad that his friend cared about the fate of two countries at once. Shahraman, in any case, was much more concerned about his safety. And of course, he did not want to be known as an unworthy ruler who doomed his people to dependence on anyone.

"India has gathered fresh strength and is stronger than ever," Rifat spoke in the words that the adviser told him. If he wanted, he could easily control the sultan, because it was enough just to know the two main features of Rifat - cowardice and passion for wealth. And therefore it was not at all difficult to suggest anything to him. But the adviser, strange as it may seem, cared about state issues, not about power.

"India? But we have always lived in peace with this country," Shahraman replied puzzled. "We managed to come to an agreement, and for many years no one violated this agreement.

"You can't trust anyone. Except for old friends, of course - Rifat was even amazed at how skillfully his words sounded, how correctly they conveyed the whole meaning. And they are just as skillful in hiding the truth.

"Then in a few days I am going to Azad with my army. Are you ready to receive guests? Shahraman asked, smiling.

And a few days later, Shahraman, patting the Prince on the head goodbye, approached his horse, saddled it and set off on another campaign.

Chapter 3. Sahirra

For the Prince, the long days of waiting dragged on again. Tuammak, the king's chief military commander and the Prince's military teacher, went on a campaign with the king, so the Prince was practically deprived of training, except for the opportunity to fight with a wooden scarecrow, which caused only a feeling of disgust in the boy. Therefore, he went to the garden early in the morning and walked there until Zoroaster found him. Or rather, he was not just walking, but practicing strange movements invented by himself. After all, no one except him thought of climbing high walls. And if anyone had ever done it, it was not in the way the Prince had come up with it. Moving away from the wall at a distance sufficient for a good run, he rushed to it, and when he approached, he ran up to it, throwing his arm as high as possible and clinging to the very top. Instead of going down the stairs, he swung over the stone railing and got to the bottom much faster. He liked the speed and the feeling of flying. And he already understood from his little experience that surprise is very important in battles. I understood that without sufficient strength, you can defeat the enemy, being just agile, fast and unexpected.

But soon an even more audacious idea was born in his head. He studied the garden inside and out, knew every tree, every stone, and almost every blade of grass in it. He explored the entire tower and the palace, failing to penetrate only a few doors. He was drawn to something new, to something that lay outside the palace: the city, its roofs. The prince wanted to feel like a bird completely. Instead of making his way through the narrow, dusty, noisy streets of the city, which did not interest him at all, he wanted to run along the rooftops, swinging easily and quickly from one to another. All that remained was to choose the right moment to implement the plan.

And it was not long in coming. It was early morning, and Zoroaster contrived to catch the Prince before he even escaped into the garden. But it so happened that while telling something, the old man dozed off, and this chance could not be missed.

Carefully, trying not to make noise, the Prince climbed out the door and took the shortest path to the exit from the palace. He himself was seized with incredible excitement. He rushed forward in anticipation of adventure and new sensations. Only now did he realize how tired he was of the palace vaults: they were too familiar to the Prince. Therefore, visiting the palace was like going on a journey for him. The very thought that Zoroaster had accidentally expressed was firmly entrenched in his mind, and the Prince was drawn to something unknown.

Once in the city, he seemed to find himself in another world. He seemed unfamiliar and unfamiliar to the Prince. Having made his way

into some deserted alley, he decided to climb onto the roofs as soon as possible. Here, below, he felt uncomfortable, everything around was somehow gray, alien and frightening. The prince, of course, did not think about the real danger, but something still worried him. And he was pulled up. Sometimes he asked Zoroaster:

- Why don't people fly like birds?

But he never understood the old man's answers. And he replied that every person should have a dream, even if it was unrealizable, and therefore there were things that a person could not do. But he has a chance to strive for it, to hope for its realization, to believe in the possibility of the impossible and that under certain conditions everything is possible, even if at first glance the circumstances are not very conducive to it. Zoroaster was wise, and the Prince was too young and inexperienced, and there was no complete understanding between them.

But somehow, from the old man's words, the Prince snatched the idea that although a person is limited in many ways, he decides for himself whether he should fight for the expansion of his freedom. Although he understood the word "freedom" itself in a completely different sense and not on the scale that this concept has. One could even say that these misunderstandings and misunderstandings were part of his lack of freedom.

The prince saw freedom in the ability to perfectly control himself, his body during the fight and during his training, which he himself treated with special love and pride. And he had no idea at all that his mind needed freedom too. Any freedom begins with freedom of thought. Free thought is not empty at all, it is much deeper, it can reach any peak and help a person in anything, being a part of himself. Pure, unclouded consciousness is the primary source of freedom. Pure thought, not spoiled by unnecessarily long and unnecessary deliberation, which does not give rise to new ideas, but only kills old ones.

Now he had to test everything he had taught himself. He had no doubts about his body. If now it was a child's self-confidence, then later it will really become a part of him.

Next to one of the houses, a pile of bags with something dense and heavy was piled up. Climbing them, you could easily reach the wooden ledges at the level of the second floor. Looking around for the last time, the Prince began to climb up. Grasping one of the planks that supported the wooden balcony with his hands and resting his feet on the wall, the Prince realized that it was no more difficult than climbing a tree. And even more interesting, because no one except him did this. And even if he were not alone, what was happening would become even more interesting. Although the Prince himself hardly wanted anyone's presence. He would not have been

able to appreciate its importance. The main thing was that he did unusual things with the ordinary; something for which it was not intended. The Prince himself felt delight and was completely absorbed in it. He felt this heady freedom that pulled him up. Not only was he torn off the ground and felt great, he was also cut off from people, or rather, from their habit of walking only in the streets between houses and not rushing upwards, not thinking about the sky, not dreaming. The prince has now, albeit for a short time, gained this freedom. His soul was like a bird now, and if he could look at it, he would forever forget about the ridiculous assumption that humans cannot fly. Truly, a child's soul can do impossible things without being completely aware of what it is doing. One random childhood dream can be so vivid that, if it came true, it could give birth to a whole new world and give it eternal light.

Once at the top, the Prince looked around. Roofs of houses were scattered around it - some a little higher, others lower. Like a giant sentry, a tower towered over the city. Compared to her, all the other houses might seem tiny and unnecessary, but in reality, she looked like a king among her subjects.

For some reason, the prince also thought that this tower resembled his father. Of course, he wasn't that tall, but his courage, courage, and strength made him just as great. The prince was far from him, but he had already lifted off the ground and was a little closer to the sky. If he could fly, he would instantly rush upward to be on par with his father. The prince didn't even think of being better than the great Shahraman. He already embodied all the best that the Prince strove for. But he could easily be better. He could have done better. After all, no one thought of the thoughts that hovered in his head. No one climbed trees or rooftops unless there was some special need. Only him. And only he was able to completely transform into a sword during a fight. And all this is almost playful, as if for fun. And surely such ingenuity could open up new, hitherto unexplored horizons for him. There was only one question left - should he think about it and throw all his strength into finding them or should everything be left as it is and everything will come by itself, as it is now?

However, children are beautiful because their minds do not think about such things at all. Children think in vivid images that remain in their memory for a long time, amaze with novelty and colors. And it does not matter at all whether it is a new word heard for the first time, a new sound, or something seen for the first time.

For the first time, the prince found himself not only outside the palace walls, but also outside of any rules. The only rule is himself. And he is limited only by his imagination.

He fearlessly walked to the edge of the house and looked down. The prince was quite high above the ground, and this caused even more excitement to rush into his blood. Stepping back and running properly, he swung over to the next roof, which was a little lower. One second it seemed to the Prince that his legs were carrying him, and the next that he was clearly in control of his body and that it perfectly followed his orders. He was pleased with the ease with which he moved. Full of fresh energy, he was ready to jump all day and all night. His strongest feeling swept over him at the very moment when he pushed off the very edge with his right foot and found himself in the air, torn away from the ground, from the restrictions, from the incredibly boring monotonous walking, even as if free from himself. From your mind. Only a seething stream of feelings. In every part of it, he felt a faint breeze blowing over him. He felt incredibly acutely, as if he was facing a real storm. Delight drowned out everything that was happening, and the Prince was left alone with the elements. I did not hear the sounds of the city - voices, clatter of hooves and creaking of wheels. Here he was in a completely different world, in a world where there are no wars, no death, no strong and weak, no masters and slaves, no good and evil. And as if to prove it, a vast and infinitely deep sky stretched out above him. The prince could no longer distinguish the boundaries between heaven and earth, they merged into one, so if they had switched places, he would not have noticed this either.

It was surprising with what grace, despite his young age, he moved. Each movement was precise, swift and smooth at the same time. I am sure that he has been working on it for decades. And therefore unmistakable, timely.

The prince was not frightened by the fact that the distance between some of the houses was really great. The feelings and emotions boiling in him gave him five times the strength, and he continued to fly from roof to roof and climb sheer walls. Once the jump was so long that the Prince could only catch the edge with his fingertips. But this did not stop him for a second or even slow him down. With one sharp push, turning his body into an arrow, he flew to the roof and ran on. Novelty added a special color to his delight. Despite the fact that all the movements were familiar to him, he used them in completely different conditions. And now they suited him perfectly.

In the distance, the gates of the goddess Ishtar appeared. The Prince did not hope to get very close to them: he was cautious, knowing that he could be caught, and this would immediately interrupt his adventure. But he could still look at them from a height, in a completely new way. And this was quite a sufficient reward for

him. A reward because he will not have to look from the bottom up, as usual, but simply forward.

After standing for a minute, contemplating the gates, the Prince turned around and again rushed to the tops of the houses to meet new impressions and sensations. Towards the freedom that blew like a wind over his face, which caught him in the air and tried to delay him in flight until the last moment. This feeling overwhelmed the Prince so much that he remembered nothing else, did not remember his father, and even forgot who he was. But at the same time, he was himself.

It is unlikely that he would have been able to find a single word to describe his impressions. But he will remember them forever. And maybe one day he will miss them, their novelty and brightness. Maybe over time, what he is doing now will become gray and almost ordinary for him, and he will no longer be able to discover something new for himself. But everything that happens for the first time is worth leaving the deepest trace in your memory.

After a while, the Prince's attention began to be attracted not only by the roofs, but also by low towers ending in pointed spires, and narrow beams between the houses. He was not yet ready to realize and admit to himself that he was beginning to get tired. Therefore, he often stopped and, instead of jumping, carefully climbed to the other side of these very crossbars, easily balancing on them with his hands. When he happened to be near one of the towers, he was inspired by the idea of finding himself on top of it, wrapping his arms around the spire and being even closer to the sky. He was drawn upwards whether he thought about it or not. And why think? And about what? He was just doing what his soul yearned for. So he climbed almost to the very top by the latticed windows and here and there the logs protruding from the stone, after which the last thing left was to grab the iron edge of the roof, push off sharply with his legs and cling to the spire. Having done so, he only pulled his other arm up, moved a little higher, and took a deep breath. The air almost made him dizzy. He was special, not at all the one that the Prince breathed every day. The air was as sweet as a dream. And he got it alone. With joy, the Prince wanted to scream with all his might, but at the last moment he realized that it was better not to do it after all. And then he took another breath and again surveyed the city around him, this time from an even greater height. The Prince did not see the city as gloomy and unfriendly, but on the contrary, lively and kind. For him, the city was not limited to streets that drew strict lines, turning the streams of people into monotonous obedient streams that were forever consenting to this dependence. The city was also a door to heaven for him, he gladly opened all kinds of paths for the Prince, even the most inconceivable, unusual for an ordinary

person, in return wishing only love. After all, only by loving could one see him like this. It is unlikely that many people even think about these gray, sometimes dilapidated buildings, unless it is their own home. And for the Prince, the whole sky was home now. He himself was a piece of blue sky, as his eyes full of delight shouted brightly.

But, perhaps, in fact, it did not belong entirely to either part of the world. Yes, he aspired upward, saw the world in a completely different way, but he still remained human. Therefore, he seemed to be on the verge. And he could become the greatest of people if he found the answer to the question: on the verge between what and what?

Like any person, after so many hours in the heat, the Prince, in addition to being tired, felt thirsty. And pretty soon it became so acute that it became impossible to resist it. He should have gone down and found water without being noticed. That is why he did not rush down immediately to search, but carefully looked out from above, looking for the right place.

A few minutes later he caught sight of a large vat standing in a narrow alley. It was quite difficult to tell from the appearance whether it was empty or full. Suspicion was aroused by drops that had accumulated on one of the sides of the vessel, which did not disappear only due to the fact that it was standing in the shade.

The roof on which the Prince stood crowned the house, the walls of which were almost perfectly smooth, the windows set unusually low, so that there was no way to get down. Therefore, taking a deep breath, the Prince ran away and jumped to the next roof, which was even lower than this one. The prince had time to notice that this jump was much more difficult for him than the others, although he had only been out of motion for a few minutes. But he did not notice that his delight had subsided. And he made this jump only out of necessity, and not in order to experience the wonderful feeling of flight.

Now nothing prevented him from going down, to the cherished goal. He looked around again - there was still no one around. Of course, there were voices in the distance, footsteps, and grumbling, but it was a long way away. Now he was alone again with another obstacle. And again it was not for pleasure, but as a necessity.

Hanging in his arms, the Prince carefully jumped down to a small wooden platform. From it, a narrow wooden ledge stretched along the wall of the house, which in fact turned out to be treacherously creaky. But after walking along it, the Prince could finally go down the stairs.

About halfway through the ledge, another unpleasant surprise presented - one of the planks turned out to be rotten and broke under the Prince, despite the fact that he was very light. Fortunately, he

managed to grab a log protruding from the wall with his hand and did not fall down, but at the same time he injured and severely bruised his leg, which slipped down. And all this was accompanied by a loud crack. Gritting his teeth tighter, he began to move on, and in half a minute his efforts were rewarded: he was able to descend and found himself on the ground. The Prince didn't think much about the pain: it wasn't that bad, and he was sure that he shouldn't notice the pain at all. Instead, he walked over to the vat, removed the lid from it, and was happy to find that it was indeed full of cool water, apparently not very long ago taken by someone.

Having drunk to his heart's content, the Prince allowed himself a little weakness - he rolled up his right trouser leg and washed the wound a little, feeling a pleasant relief every time the water touched it.

Evening was approaching. The Prince suddenly thought that it was time for him to go back to the palace, but suddenly a voice was heard, which for some reason the Prince immediately identified as unpleasant:

"What are you doing here?" Who allowed you to touch water? And put your vile hands into it? These words sounded almost triumphant. They belonged to a rather tall guy, larger than the Prince. Outwardly, due to his ragged clothes and dusty face, he looked more like a street beggar or thief, so it was not surprising that he behaved like this. A few younger boys were standing around him. Their eyes had exactly the same expression as the leader's, but none of them said a word or tried to do anything.

"Are you deaf?" I'm talking to you!

Surprisingly, the Prince did not think of a fight. Not because he was frightened - it wasn't. He just didn't feel guilty. Is water really so valuable that someone can be sorry for a few sips? He voiced this idea in response:

"I'm just very thirsty!" Do you really feel sorry for plain water?

"I don't care at all what you want!" Who are you? This is the first time I've seen you here! Looks like I'm going to have to teach you the rules here! The leader's eyes flashed menacingly, and he moved towards the Prince, rubbing his fists.

Now he realized that the fight was inevitable. And with displeasure he felt that a slight excitement seized him. He wasn't afraid of one enemy, but what if the others stood up for their leader? It is unlikely that they are well acquainted with the sense of justice. Trying to drive away these thoughts, the Prince decided to accept this almost unvoiced and meaningless challenge. But as he took a step, he suddenly realized that his leg actually hurt more than he had thought before. And he cannot walk normally, but can only limp.

"Look!" And he's also a cripple? It's a pity I'm so heartless! The new enemy said to the Prince, laughing loudly and maliciously.

The prince had already prepared for the worst, when suddenly another surprise happened.

"Ali, stop!" Stop immediately! A small girl's thin voice rang out. The prince somehow immediately guessed that she was the sister of this guy.

"Sahirra?" Are you again? Why do you always get in the way at the most inappropriate moments? Don't you see? I have a serious conversation with this thief! Ali replied with great dissatisfaction and some confusion in his voice, as if justifying himself.

"He's not a thief!" He was just thirsty! If only your mother knew what you were doing again! Did you bring a sack of grain from your uncle? No? I knew it! You're upsetting us all again. It's a pity that our father is not with us! The girl blurted out. She wasn't afraid at all when she said all this. Apparently, she knew how to control her brother. She knew that he would not raise a hand against his own sister, that Ali did not want to violate his mother's will and fall low in her eyes. And that he wasn't so heartless at all, he just lacked something, and that he found something in his gang, not thinking that others didn't respect him, but rather just feared him.

Ali stood in obvious indecision. With a few sentences, the little sister managed to convince him, but he couldn't give up like this, in one second, so he feigned doubts for a while.

"All right, you're lucky, stranger!" He finally said, then turned around and walked away. The rest of the boys standing around him, after standing for a while, also began to disperse, until the Prince was left alone with little Sahirra. She looked at him with undisguised curiosity.

"Who are you?" And where are you from? She asked him.

"I live there," said the Prince, pointing to the tower that towered over the city.

It was clear from the girl's eyes that she immediately understood and believed everything. The prince was experiencing something inexplicable now. He saw in the words, actions, and even in the girl's gaze something almost completely new and exciting in its own way. The pestering of the brawler was not such a surprise to him, but what this girl he didn't know did... She just helped him, maybe even saved him. Although this thought hurt the Prince's pride, he could not resist it. Why did she do this? Why did she look at him so strangely? He didn't know that there was a simple name for all this: kindness. Despite the difficult fate, this girl managed to keep kindness in her heart, although even she herself did not yet fully understand what it was and why she needed it.

It was as if the prince himself was imbued with this kindness - it was so pure and genuine that it crept right into his heart. It was so strong that it drove away bad thoughts from him, thoughts that he could unworthily lose the battle. Something new has settled in his soul and now he will have to reckon with it. Something that, in a sense, turned his life upside down. Even if he sleeps for years.

"It's already evening!" Don't you have to go home? A gentle voice squeaked.

The prince looked around, looked at the palace and, lowering his head, said:

"I guess it's time, but... I can't.

The girl looked at him uncomprehendingly with her big clear eyes, and then said:

"Remember that you have a friend here!"

And turning around, she quickly ran away somewhere.

The prince really felt that he could not go back. He thought about how he would look into his father's eyes when he began to tell him about the fight that had not taken place, in which he had almost allowed fear to take hold of him and in which he could have been shamefully beaten. And somewhere in the neighborhood of these thoughts, there was a tiny corner for others. Thoughts about what this girl said to him at last. A friend? The well-known word now seemed so incomprehensible to him. He had never wondered if he had friends and if he could be a friend himself, so such a collision with reality surprised him very much.

Instead of going home, he climbed back onto the roof, found a cozy place and sat down, after which he began to look at the sky. After a while, the stars began to light up on it, and the evening began to smoothly flow into night. The prince sat and thought about everything that had happened during the day and thought about what he should do next. Then fatigue overcame him, and he did not notice how he fell asleep.

Dawn melted the darkness of the night, and the city began to come alive again, filled with sounds. The prince woke up from this - he was used to silence in the morning, so someone's conversations nearby did not allow him to sleep.

Surprisingly, his thoughts changed during the night: he no longer refused to return to the palace. The reason for this was at least hunger, due to which the Prince's stomach sometimes made growling sounds, as if it was some kind of animal. Sleep in general has a miraculous effect on our thoughts and can easily turn them into

opposites, making darkness light, the invisible visible, and the incomprehensible understandable.

The prince went downstairs and wandered to the palace. He did not feel the strength to travel on the rooftops, so he chose the path on the ground.

He had scarcely managed to turn out of a small alley when a soldier ran up to him and spoke quickly and confusedly about how good it was that the boy had been found. Another ran up after him, grabbed the Prince's arm and hurriedly pulled him along.

It was the first time the Prince had seen his father so sad. And he was even more surprised by the fact that he limped on one leg. When the boy was brought, he came closer and silently ordered the soldiers to leave. Not even a smile flashed on his face. Of course, he was glad that the Prince had been found and nothing had happened to him, but he had no strength left for this joy, and anxiety still possessed him, so the sadness in his gaze was more severe instead of joy.

The prince lowered his head in shame. Both were silent. The prince did not know what to say, and Shahraman was too tired of anxious thoughts to choose the right one.

"What's wrong with your leg?" The boy tried to ask very timidly and hesitantly.

"You'd better tell me what's wrong with my son?" Shahraman replied with bitterness in his voice.

With that, the Prince felt that he immediately wanted to sink into the ground, to evaporate, to fly away, anything to end up somewhere else instead. He felt how he himself was squeezed by this bitterness and resentment in the voice of his father - the dearest person in his life.

"I didn't come back to Babylon to find out that you had disappeared somewhere!" I wanted to share the joy of my victory! I didn't sleep all night! The accumulated resentment, accelerating and accelerating, left Shahraman, turning into words. Sometimes he resembled a big child, and his voice at such moments could even seem funny. However, the Prince was still not laughing. Gradually, he began to feel the full weight of the guilt that had fallen on him. Or rather, he thought it was all of it.

"When did you run away?" How did it happen? Shahraman asked sternly.

-In the morning. Right from Zoroaster, when he fell asleep," the Prince replied timidly, almost whispering.

-Fell asleep? Did he fall asleep? So it was not in vain that I drove him away! Shahraman said with a strange glee in his voice, mixed with genuine anger.

-Ran? The Prince asked in bewilderment.

-Namely! Instead of watching you, he was asleep! This is unforgivable! Now I will find you a new teacher," Shahraman explained.

Although the Prince did not dare to say a word against it, he suddenly felt something stirring in him, protesting with all his being against what he had heard. The Little Prince did not even think about how attached he was to the old man. Of course, not as much as he did to his father, but still he spent most of his time with this man in those days when his father was not in the palace or even in the city.

A few more seconds passed before the Prince thought that he was to blame for this. He wanted adventures and made his father worry, and because of him, Zoroaster was expelled. For some reason, the prince remembered how he had dreamed of learning Indian from him.

"Will he teach me to speak Indian?" The Prince asked.

Shahraman did not expect such a question at all, which is why he was even embarrassed at first. But then, after thinking for a while, he said:

- I think so. This may be useful to you. Now go briskly into the garden! And don't dare to run away again! And I need to rest, I'm too tired.

In his father's voice, the Prince heard a very unusual anxiety for him. She was pressing on him especially hard now, so he still decided to say the main words after Shahraman had already turned away.

"Father, forgive me!"

Shahraman turned. The prince remembered him for the rest of his life exactly as he saw it now. Strong again, standing firmly on both feet, with a smile on his face. He remembered every detail: a graying thick beard that took up half of his face, large gray eyes, in which, despite all his strength and masculinity, one could read something childish, completely childish. His skin shone in the sun, his cheeks were slightly round, but this did not prevent him from showing severity. His voice was strong and confident, but Shahraman himself hardly thought about it - he was just talking. And he often managed to do it somehow singing, humming. There were no echoes of approaching old age in his voice yet, but they suggested themselves - he was about fifty years old.

Shahraman was dressed in a lilac turban and a robe of the same color. This made any of his movements as smooth as his voice, just as majestic and powerful.

But the Prince's attention was captured by a smile. A hail of thoughts fell on him. The new feeling he had felt the day before, when it had literally emanated from the little girl, had come back to him. He finally fully realized that his father is very kind to him, he loves his only son. And the kindness was best read in Shahraman's smile. Now she was already devoid of any anger or resentment. There was kindness in her, there was forgiveness that he gave to the Prince. And involuntarily he smiled too. It was like a handshake that sealed the union. Even more. It was not a simple trust, but a sensual one, expressed in mutual kindness, mixed with an unusual and new view of each other. After standing for a few more seconds, silently and still with the same smile on his face, which made it even more deeply imprinted in the Prince's memory, he turned and walked away, still limping on one leg.

Now Shahraman has not told his son what happened. But then the Prince learned from him that the hike he had gone on with Rifat was not at all like a simple walk. Not far from Azad, they were drawn into a fight with the Indians. The victory was miraculous and not immediate, which is why Shahraman did not return to Babylon for so long. Three times his army had to retreat. At the head of the Indian army were two of the best commanders, the Maharajas, who were as familiar with the military craft as a simple soldier and knew how to skillfully manage their warriors. But one night, one of Shahraman's party managed to find the enemy's secret camp, and, attacking under cover of darkness, the Persians were victorious, taking the enemy by surprise. It was on this night that the king was wounded. The wound was not so serious, but for a while he could not walk confidently and limped.

In India, after such a defeat, incredible events took place: because the best military leaders died then, a split occurred in the country, and each Maharaja began to rule in his lands. There was no enmity between them, but there was no friendship either. Neither of them cared about the other's problems. The Maharajas wrote their own laws and arranged life in their possessions in accordance with their ideas. And the Persian king could safely return to his home, to Babylon, without fear of new attacks. If they could be repeated, it would not be soon, although the anxiety did not leave Shahraman for a long time. He felt quite deeply the danger that threatened him and his people. Perhaps he was helped in part by the fact that he himself was in the thick of the battles and knew firsthand the Indians, what they were like in battle and what danger they represented.

Chapter 4. Chance

Many years have passed since then, and almost everything has been forgotten. The Prince no longer remembered old Zoroaster, although he had never become attached to another teacher, even though he had taught him, just a little, to speak another language, as the Prince had once dreamed of. After so many years, it no longer seemed wild to him that the same words could sound different while retaining their meaning. Perhaps he would even laugh if he remembered his conversation with Zoroaster long ago. Although, perhaps, he did not laugh often.

The prince, now a young man of eighteen, had become a warrior over the years. Quite intentionally and consciously, pursuing approximately the same goals that I defined in childhood. It is unlikely that he would have found a worthy opponent in all of Persia, despite all his youth and inexperience - he has never fought for real in his life, when every breath can be the last and death walks around at arm's length. However, he was incredibly agile, confident and cunning.

Shahraman has aged a lot. His beard and hair were almost completely grey, some spots had appeared on his face, his skin was covered with wrinkles and had become a little flabby, although he still had a firm grip on his sword and could fight well. Time did not touch only his eye. The same deep, courageous gray eyes were now looking at the Prince.

"Father, let me go with you!" I've been waiting for it! All his life! he asked.

-No. You are needed here. Persia needs a ruler, and I am sure you can defend this city," Shahraman replied with sadness in his voice. He was drawn to give his consent, because he believed that his son would be able to achieve a lot, defend his life with weapons in his hands, fearlessly facing the danger. He could leave Tuammak to guard Babylon and go into battle with his son, as his heart told him. But in such matters he had to think first of all about the throne and the fate of the country.

This conversation was the third in the last week. Now the Prince had one last chance: early in the morning, his father and his army went to war. He longed to go with him and fight side by side, just as his own imagination had once imagined as a child. Now the Prince trusted her easily, as if he were still a child. He still could not come to terms with his father's will. But he could not afford to object to it.

From the intensity of feelings, the Prince could not sleep that night. It seemed to him impossibly long, dark and cold. The thoughts in his mind quickly changed from mobile and deep to utterly disorderly, useless, and yet completely unchanging, as if someone had carved a statue out of them and left it standing forever.

Something had to be done! This thought came to him at dawn, breaking through the thickness of resentment, foolish hope, anger and sadness. And he chose the path he had already studied. He will just run away. But not now, but a few hours after his father's departure. And he will go with him.

He knew what this promised him. And this time everything will be even more serious. But the young prince was not yet able to restrain his desires, his excitement and ardor. He delegated special powers to the head of the guard, concealing his father's will from him and pretending to take him with him, he began to pack. When the deception is revealed, it will be too late and no one will report it to Shahraman in time. The rest of the Prince did not care much.

In ten years, not only people, but entire states change. India from a weakened and fragmented country has again become strong and dangerous. It all started when one of the three brothers, who were the sons of one of the commanders who died ten years ago, became Maharajah. Using power, he gradually managed to endow it with his two older brothers. One of them was indifferent to wars, preferred a peaceful life to everything and did not get involved in the affairs of the other two brothers, living in remote lands in the east of the country. Therefore, his land remained separate, independent and original.

The other two brothers, meanwhile, planned not only to return the country to its former power and greatness and take revenge for the old defeat, but also to carry out a blood feud. Therefore, even they, rather peaceful in disposition, having accumulated strength, undertook a campaign into Persia, and acting in such a way as not to get involved in the battle in the enemy's country, but to lure him as deep as possible into their own lands and destroy his entire army without a trace. After several lightning raids by the Indian army, Persia was engaged in a new war, and now Shahraman was going on a campaign in order to destroy the insidious plans of the Indians again with a sword in hand and a huge army.

Rifat stood motionless and looked at the Maharaja, the youngest of the three brothers. There was something like fright in the sultan's gaze, and it seemed that he was about to prostrate himself in front of... Who? Enemy? Ally?

Maharajah, in turn, watched Rifat. Sometimes it seemed humiliating to him to talk to this clumsy, cowardly dwarf. But he had no doubt that Rifat would accept his offer.

The Maharaja had a strong and authoritative gaze, as if breathing fire, just like his father, who almost ten years ago had stood before Rifat in the same way and offered him an alliance against Persia. The same thing was now offered to the Sultan by the son of that man. He did it just as subtly, leaving a way for retreat: if something went wrong, then Shahraman would not even suspect betrayal on the part of an old friend.

The Maharaja promised wonderful riches, prosperity of the country due to the alliance with India. He knew how to convince Rifat. And he agreed again, as he had done ten years ago, only without talking to the adviser. Then the Indian troops were defeated, and he did not have time to go over to their side. This time things were going to turn out differently, and at the most decisive moment, Rifat could turn his warriors against the Persians and strike at them, almost destroying the chance of victory. And even a chance for life. All that was required of the sultan was to wait for a messenger from the Maharaja with the news that the time had come, and to move his army from Azad to the rear of the Persians.

After several fights, seeing the strength of the enemy and his cunning, Shahraman and his commanders decided on a rather desperate act. Any war ends with the defeat of one of the sides, the killing of hundreds and thousands of civilians and the destruction of cities. And what if we start the war with this?

The Persian troops, bypassing the Indian camp, rushed straight to India, where there were almost no soldiers left ready to defend their cities. And when the Indians realize what has happened and come back, it will surely be too late. Almost without resistance, the Persians captured several cities. They didn't even need purpose-built giant catapults. The cities remained almost untouched, but were now completely in the hands of the Persian king. And when the armies of the two Maharajas came back, the battles for the cities unfolded as if the Persians were their real masters, and the Indians were the invaders.

Such unusual measures were a rarity even to Shahraman. He is used to fighting openly, honestly and fearlessly. This time he could

not take such a risk: the fate of the entire state depended on the outcome of the war. Old fears still haunted him, and he was ready to do a lot to get rid of them once and for all. He cannot betray his ancestors, who founded the city and the empire, turning it into a formidable force.

And the trick worked. In such conditions, the Indians could not win and after several attempts surrendered. One of the Maharajas was killed, the other was wounded. The survivor was captured, and he was threatened with rotting in prison for the rest of his life.

The war was won, the danger was over. Now Persia will be able to dictate its will even in these distant lands. And, perhaps, during the next campaign, Shahraman will move even further. But now it was time to go home. However, by the will of fate, something happened that forced the king and his army to stay in India.

One day, when the sun was already going down, enveloping everything around with bright red rays, several people on horseback rode up to the city. The Persian soldiers let them in, but immediately took away their weapons and horses. These people turned out to be messengers from the third Maharaja, who did not participate in the campaigns of his brothers - the vizier and the soldiers accompanying him. When Shahraman learned about this, he ordered the vizier to be brought to him.

When he came to the Persian king, he at first told only that he had come on behalf of a third brother. As ambassador, he had to negotiate peace. The conditions were as follows: the possessions of the third brother retained their borders and independence; the surviving brother was to be released from captivity, and in return for an indefinite guarantee of peace. Maharaja had something to lose, but he could not oppose the Persian army much. And this move was supposed to help him. But then the vizier suddenly offered help to Shahraman (apparently, it was an accidental idea, because at one point the vizier's eyes flashed brightly, lit up with life and did not fade away until the end of the conversation).

"How can you help me?" Shahraman asked.

"I will help you capture Kashi, my lord's city," the vizier answered him. "After the death of the third brother, the whole dynasty will be interrupted, and India will again become divided and weak.

Amar, that was the vizier's name, was already an old man, thin and weak in appearance, constantly coughing and moving around leaning on his staff. His eyes seemed predatory and evil, his nose was slightly elongated and hooked. The skin was already blackened in

some places, and on the forehead, on top of thin gray eyebrows, several neat red dots were drawn. His voice was obliging and at the same time very firm. Offering to accept the betrayal of his Maharajah, he pronounced almost every word with special pleasure.

Shahraman agreed only after Amar had clarified everything. Early in the morning, he will open the city gates and let the Persians into the city. The signal will be a fiery arrow shot upwards. The rest is a matter of time. Caught off guard, the Indians will not be able to fight off the attackers so easily. The main goal is the treasures of Maharaja. The vizier promised that there was something in the treasury that would overshadow everything else, even the victory itself.

And in addition to all this, the vizier set a condition: for help, he would take something from the treasury of the Maharaja at his discretion. Literally one thing. The vizier's voice was soft and ingratiating, but at the same time every word seemed thoughtful, aimed at achieving the goal, and therefore very convincing and endearing.

It was also very important to Shahraman that he would be able to get rid of the enemy for many years to come, bend him to his will and secure Persia, although the third Maharaja did not seem to be going to get involved in the war with the Persians himself. This seemed to the king even more important than treasures. Perhaps it was only for this reason that he agreed to all these tricks and tricks. And it was hard not to agree that they had already shown their amazing results - this victory was the fastest of all. Maybe even too fast.

For the Prince, his whole plan was hopelessly ruined in the first few hours. After leaving the city, he lost his way and then searched for footprints in the sand for a long time. Sometimes they broke off, and you had to move at random. And so it went on for several days. One morning he came across an Indian camp and found that no fighting had been fought and that his father and his army were nowhere to be found. The long search for the Prince was also in vain. What could this have happened? Had the Indians defeated his father so easily that their forces were not even hurt in the fight? But this is impossible, the Prince instantly dismissed this idea as ridiculous. There was only one thing left - to sneak into the camp and find out everything.

In the evening, the Prince, having found a breach in the ring of the guard, managed to penetrate into the camp and hide in the thicket of bushes, which quite reliably hid him from prying eyes. No

one would have thought of looking for him there. And no one would have thought of looking for an enemy in their camp - too bold an idea came to the Prince. Either a desperate madman or a person thirsting for dangerous adventures could decide to do this.

As the darkness of the night covered the camp, the Prince climbed out of the bushes and found water and food - he set out on his journey with almost no supplies, and several days of travel exhausted him, exhausting him. Thirst hurt my throat, and hunger made my head refuse to think clearly. The only thing that kept the Prince sane was the desire with which he had embarked on this journey, the desire for honor and glory and the hope of testing his blade in battle. But to do this, he will have to sit quietly and observe.

In the morning, waking up very early, when the sun was just beginning to tear the darkness with bright, fresh rays, the Prince found that the camp was already awake. Every now and then people passed him, still unaware that he was near. The prince felt his heart pounding wildly. He was even afraid that someone would hear it, afraid that this knocking would betray him. But the worst thing that happened was that one of the soldiers poured a vat of some slop right into the bushes, and the fetid goo spread at the Prince's feet, adding a special shade to his passion for adventure. A drop (or rather a whole puddle) of reality, which showed that not everything is so simple and romantic. However, they had to endure. Indeed, he should not go to Maharaja with a complaint about the poor reception of guests?

Watching from hiding, the Prince saw a messenger arrive with the news that the Persians were capturing the cities. Now the Prince understood everything, and he still had only one way - to go after the enemy, all the time remaining unnoticed, to find his father.

However, everything was still not so simple. Once the Prince had to spend the night in the forest, right on the damp ground. In the morning, my body ached from lying on the roots of trees and cold grass for a long time. Fatigue took its toll, and the Prince lagged behind the Indians, who marched almost without interruption, and soon he was almost a day's journey from the enemy.

One day actually plays a very big role in a war: it can change everything at once, and the Prince, who reached his father's army after the battle, found that he would not be able to fight again. Realizing what was going on, he went straight to the king without hesitation. The prince knew what he could hear from him now. Shahraman himself was now in one of the rooms of the palace.

Approaching the door of the room, the Prince met the eyes of a strange old man who was just beaming, although he did not even smile. His eyes said all that was needed. The strange slit gave them a predatory expression even with a perfectly calm face. A beautiful

expensive turban tied with a red ribbon was tied over her head - perhaps a special insignia, decorated with a golden circle in the center and giving a special honor. The old man himself was dressed in a long robe with a sharp, sharply defined collar and long sweeping sleeves. His clothes hid the painful thinness of his body, but the wrinkled skin on his face and hands still betrayed his age.

After looking into those eyes for a moment, the Prince again switched to the upcoming conversation with his father. A picture from his childhood came to life, when he stood in front of him bashfully and chose words that stubbornly did not want to be. Now history could repeat itself again. Taking a breath in his chest, he pushed the door open and walked inside, ready for almost anything.

Shahraman knew nothing about his son's arrival. But when he saw him, instead of frowning and scolding him, he suddenly drew his sword and shouted:

"Defend yourself!"

The prince was taken aback and only looked at his father uncomprehendingly. And he approached his son with a wide smile, hiding his sword in its scabbard, and embraced him. What he wanted most of all happened - someone truly close to him was next to him. Someone with whom he could share his joy. The joy of victory.

When the storm of emotions subsided, Shahraman told the Prince about everything that had happened. The prince was able to complete the mosaic of the missing pieces in his head.

For several minutes they stood in silence. Shahraman even got bored and began to walk sideways. And the Prince kept trying to calm the flow of thoughts inside him. In the end, he asked the question:

"What kind of old man was he?"

"This is the vizier who offered his help," Shahraman said.

"Help with what?"

"In victory over our enemy!"

There was something unusual in his voice. Triumph. A celebration that was almost saturated with composure.

And Shahraman told his son the whole plan. He hadn't even had time to bring it to his combat commanders yet. The prince was the first.

And this time, without even allowing him to come to his senses, Shahraman, still smiling, said to the Prince jubilantly:

"And I think you deserve your chance!" Prove yourself in a real fight!

Chapter 5. Dance in the Void

The camp slept on the last night before the attack on the city. The Prince also rested. Only the forest around the camp did not sleep. And together with the forest, all nature. This time she decided to present a small surprise: in the evening, the sky was overcast, so that even the setting sun barely broke through them. Therefore, the night was darker than usual, and shortly after sunset a heavy rain dripped and a thunderstorm broke out.

"We will set out when the first signs of dawn appear in the sky. We will stop at the exit from the forest so that the troops are not visible from the city, and we will wait for the signal," Shahraman said slowly, as if singing, and looked around the commanders around him. Having gathered in the largest tent, they discussed the plan of action. The army was already ready, the only thing he needed now was a good rest after a long march in the sweltering heat.

"But what are we going to do if the plan fails?" Tuammak muttered hesitantly, the oldest of all those gathered here, but still retaining some of his burning black hair - for as long as he remembered himself as a warrior, he had fought under the leadership of his king and was used to trusting him, thinking like him. And now Tuammak just wanted to be fully aware of the situation, to know what to expect and what to do.

In the next moment, all eyes were fixed on Shahraman with greedy curiosity. The latter simply replied without even thinking, as if the answer was ready in advance:

"The city is almost impregnable and will be able to hold the siege for a very long time," he answered. "All we have to do is accept the offer of peace and return to Persia.

Everyone looked at each other in silence, nodding in agreement. And so it was decided, because, based on common sense, Shahraman was absolutely right: even at the cost of huge losses, it would be almost impossible to capture the city without breaking into it. And the war was already won.

"A lot depends on this traitor. Won't he let you down? What if it's a trap? Tuammak asked, leaving last.

"It seems that he has some personal scores to settle with Maharaja. He told me his plan with great pleasure. I think he can be trusted," Shahraman replied.

The answer suited Tuammak, and he left the tent after the others. By that time, the rain had already gained strength and was pounding everywhere. Shahraman extinguished the torch that

illuminated the tent from the inside and went to sleep. It was the easiest for him: there was not a single superfluous thought in his head, and all those that nevertheless settled there were fresh, clear and did not produce unnecessary questions. And so he fell asleep to the sound of rain, thunder, and occasional flashes of lightning, serenely like a child. Warrior. Tsar.

The whole camp was also falling asleep, despite the rain that poured incessantly, it seemed to want to stop the entire army with its waters. Where the rain hardly reached, under the dense canopy of trees, long, almost human-sized torches still stood, scratching the darkness of the night with their dim light; the rest had long since gone out, sending up a thin wisp of smoke. Everything fell asleep. Even the guard assigned to keep a watchful eye seemed to be falling asleep. Those who walked back and forth gradually stopped and pressed against the trees to rest. Those who were to fight in the morning were already far from this world. They slept soundly and gained strength.

Only the water did not sleep that night. It has flowed and will always flow as long as time passes. Now it was raining, getting heavier, cutting the silence more and more with sad music. It was as if the rain intended to shed all the tears of the world at once and stop the pain once and for all.

The prince walked down a narrow, dark corridor. Ahead, somewhere unreachably far away, the light flickered. The air was stale, stuffy, and dusty. But it seemed to be passing through it, the Prince did not feel it... - he simply did not breathe! All his senses seemed to be dulled. He heard nothing, as if the world did not exist at all and there was nowhere for sounds to come from. He couldn't see his hands or feet, because of the darkness that had engulfed the hallway. If there was no world, there was no sun. The light in the distance was golden, alluring, and seemed to be somehow sweet. Sweet as... He was the sole target of the Prince's movement. Without stopping for a second, he wandered on, trying to walk as quietly as possible, although he still did not hear anything. It seemed to the prince that he was sliding on the spot, as if someone was holding him.

There was a feeling that he had already seen this glow. Once upon a time. And the next second, it seemed almost native to him. And then a stranger. Unfamiliar.

Then, in an instant, the Prince realized that he was only a few steps away from the source of the glow. But now it was so strong that he could not see what was hidden under his shroud. He stretched out his hand and saw the support go from under his feet. But he did not fall. It hung in the void. Yes, it was in the emptiness, there was nothing below.

His hand felt something alive. The very thought of life in such an incredible place was frightening. He felt a blow. Then another. Trembling and strong. A living heart. He clutched a living, beating human heart in his hand. The glow went out at once, everything around disappeared and turned into emptiness. There was not even darkness around - *Absolute* Emptiness is something that cannot be, there was not even emptiness itself.

The beating of the heart. The Prince heard it clearly, although it was not clear how. He felt it, soaked in it, this resounding ringing resounded through him to the most distant parts of his body, to every hair. A small drop of blood flowed through his heart, slowly, unhurriedly, and his heart, afraid to frighten this drop, seemed to be waiting for it to make its way. Then it stretched into a thread, swayed uncertainly for the last time and fell into the abyss.

Suddenly, a door appeared from the void right in front of the Prince's eyes. A bright light shone through the cracks along its contour. The strange world around him became even richer: now there were tiny splashes of light and a door to nowhere. Or maybe there was something behind this door. The prince wanted to find out: if the light was coming from there, then there was something there. He went to the door - the world was not as empty as it seemed to him at first: after all, he was walking on something, although he did not understand what exactly, because he did not hear anything, and the light from behind the door began to blind him. The prince grabbed the handle and tugged at it. He pulled it with force - it was locked tightly, the door did not even move. You need a key. But where to get it in this place? His heart pounded harder - he guessed, the thought flashed through him unimaginably sharply, like a whip hitting his back. The key was the heart. The prince brought him to the door, and the next second he froze in surprise. He was ready to swear that a moment ago, before the thought came to him, he had seen on the door an ordinary keyhole for a small key, perhaps even an unnaturally small one. And now it has stretched, taking the shape of a heart. The prince had no choice but to reach out to the door and put his heart there. The door swallowed him, not touching the Prince's hand, only gently whispering along it and as if pushing him away, but gently, unobtrusively. And it opened itself, flooding everything around with light, although there was nothing around. Or maybe there was something, but the Prince just didn't notice

anything? Anyway, that's definitely not what he was thinking. He stepped out the door, and it closed softly behind him, creaking slightly. There was something in this creak that even the Prince himself noticed - he turned around and stretched out his hand, not knowing why. That's the way it should be. That's what the door wants. As he stretched out his hand, he felt the same heart put back into it, only it was beating harder than before. Somehow frightened. Around - the Prince decided to finally look around, or rather, he made up his mind - everything was obscured by the golden light. It did not warm. It did not become as light as dawn. It was a cold glow. The same as from gold. He scooped up a handful of this light—yes, he could feel it, like sand. And it, like sand, gently slipped through his fingers. He ran away, drained, mixed with the rest of the light. Getting used to it, the Prince noted that it flowed somehow unnaturally. Small streams of it flowed down as if on some invisible walls, somewhere it swirled like clouds of dust from the wind. A small, raging ocean of light that doesn't exist.

The prince walked forward a few steps. He felt another door: "There must be light leaking through it too," thought the Prince. I walked a little more and saw this door. The heart beat even more anxiously, or rather, both hearts. But each in its own way. He repeated the operation. The door gave way again, this time less willingly, with a greater creak and more slowly. But it did. She finally let the Prince out. But only him. He, going out of the threshold (if he was at this door at all, since everything that was behind it broke off somehow instantly, abruptly and... anything but normally), I discovered this by glancing briefly at the door, which had been hastily closed - it seemed not to open at all, only the appearance - it still did not let out a single speck of dust. They seemed to be beating against something invisible, trying to escape from their prison, but they couldn't. And the Prince could, even more easily than he had hoped. And he stepped into the void again. Into a new, different emptiness. Although how can you judge this, if there was nothing in this emptiness and there could be no difference? But it still existed. There was not a drop of blood in this world. There was a heart, but there was no drop. He walked a little longer. Each step more and more instilled a new feeling in him - fear. That he would not come back. He will be stuck here forever, like in a swamp. He stopped and turned around. I tried to take a step. It didn't work out. I took a step back and it turned out to be easy. There is no way forward, that is, back to the door. He looked at his heart. It was in his hand. In his hands. In his power. He unclenched his hand as he continued to stare at his heart. It remained where he had held it a moment ago. It hung in the void. It did not fall, it did not rise, it did not waver even from the blows that reached the Prince's ears with a resounding ring. But

it wasn't like an ordinary sound. Most likely, he heard... with his eyes, just his mind drew the illusion of ordinary perception with his ears. And that same mind sobered him up, giving him a true picture of what was happening.

Looking at his heart even more intently, he seemed to order him to move a little further away from him, closer to the door. Even closer. It was flying, being in his power. He enjoyed the feeling, feeling a thousand times stronger than when he was just walking with it in his hand. Now the Prince did not even need to move, to waste his strength. Now he spent only bits of consciousness, moving the key forward. This time the door was not at all cordial. It was as if she did not want to let her heart come closer. And then the Prince directed all his consciousness into this heart, as if competing with the door. His thought, his whole consciousness, turned into the sharpest dagger and entered his heart deeply, to the very hilt and even deeper. Then through. The dagger disappeared, having done its job, and the heart breathed its last. The last blow. And it exploded. It burst, spraying millions of fragments around the world. Yes, now this emptiness has also become a world, a world of a broken, dead heart.

The door swung open instantly. The prince was able to take a step. Then another one. He did not look back, although it seemed that his heart, even if broken, was calling to him, raising its hands to him, bleeding, or rather, bloody tears. But he went further. I went through the door. It slammed shut silently. He's back. Where to? Wonder. Where did he return from? Even more incomprehensible! It seemed that every speck of light was asking him a question. But he didn't hear anything. And I didn't remember. He woke up.

The sky in the east twitched with a crimson glow, the fog gradually dissipated. Dawn was coming into its own, the forest was filled with sounds. And here it is, the long-awaited flash - a burning arrow shot high above the gates of the city. As it always happens before the rain - the first large drop falls from the sky, slips over the leaf, hangs for a moment and falls down loudly, as if calling the rest of the drops with it, so the Persian army moved forward, obeying this call, this arrow, which disappeared from sight in just a few moments. There was a clink of ammunition, the clatter of hooves - the horses switched to a light trot.

This army would look very strange to someone else if there were such an army - silent, even and unhurried, like a fog pouring out of the forest, cold and frightening. Like a procession of the dead - it is difficult to imagine, if not to see: it seems to be ordinary soldiers,

horses, chain mail, spears, swords, but something was wrong in them, as if they really went to the call with a clouded mind.

All this pre-dawn idyll was disturbed by the battle cry of the commander of the army - the Persian king, waving his hand, ordered to move on to the run. Now the clang of mail, the clatter of hooves and the clang of swords were really audible.

The path from the forest to the fortress wall was made very quickly. This was the idea - a swift attack that was supposed to take the city guards by surprise. However, the Persians were not the only ones who noticed the arrow: the alarmed Indian soldiers rushed to the attack, managing to merge on the run into a single detachment capable of repelling the enemy.

At first, the battle unfolded at the walls of the city, but no one had time to close the gates, and the Persian army, which had a huge numerical superiority, poured into the city, taking control of the city gates and part of the fortress wall.

Screams and the clashing of blades were heard everywhere, and there was a smell of blood. The horsemen mercilessly galloped over the wounded and dead, cutting through the Indian soldiers one by one like air. The whistle of catapult shells rang out - this time, it was decided to use the siege weapons into battle as well.

The prince was blinded by excitement, years of training were not wasted: he fought like a tiger; Strength, agility, instant reaction - all this helped him defeat enemies one by one. A blow is blood, a moan or a cry drowned in a new moan. His hands were sticky, his clothes were stained and cut in places, and there was a shallow cut on his shoulder, such a trifle that the Prince did not even notice it. Dreams of honor, of heroism, clouded his mind, his eyes were unrecognizable, black and full of rage.

But suddenly something happened that even the Prince did not expect: a maddened, possibly wounded horse rushed towards him at breakneck speed, not seeing anything in its path. Then, in some incredible way, the young man felt that another sword was raised above him from behind and he simply did not have time to repel it or avoid it. A one-in-a-million chance - and he jumped on the horse from the side, miraculously getting his foot into one stirrup and somehow grabbing the saddle with his hand. Then a jerk - and here he is in the saddle. But the horse was uncontrollable, as if it were being driven by something, and the Prince was rushing forward into the city, through the open gates, towards battle, victory, honor, and glory, as he himself thought, and so he even decided that fate favored him and that it would be better this way. However, once in the city, he still hurried to leave the horse.

In all that had happened, the Prince saw the finger of fate - it gave him a chance - now, once in the city, he would quickly get to the palace and, perhaps, even to the treasury of the Indian Maharajah.

By this time, the morning sun had already come into its own: it became much lighter, the first rays were already running over the tallest buildings of the city. The coolness of the night ran away, the water left by the night rain dried up in places, but somewhere else you could see streams or puddles - soon the sun's rays would be bathed in them.

Being a daredevil, but still not a fool, the Prince instantly joined the detachment of Persian warriors. So he had an incomparably greater chance of being everywhere in the front ranks and staying alive.

And again he was seized by excitement, it seemed that his eyes shot right and left with sparks - as if a wild animal had escaped from the cage and could not get enough of someone else's pain. Still, he was human, which was both frightening and reassuring - his mind was now only clouded by illusions - quite a human mistake, but in reality, the Prince was not the truly cold-blooded and ruthless killer that he now seemed even to himself.

Fiery arrows and catapult shells whistled in the sky. Chaos reigned everywhere. Many defenders of the city fled. The clashing of blades, the constant screaming - everything was the same as a few minutes ago, there, at the walls of the city, only louder and sharper, and then everything merged into a single stream, ringing in the ears and frightening to death.

The detachment that the Prince joined was quite large - about a hundred brave warriors, archers and several riders. Although with resistance, they moved further and further into the city, smashing everyone and everything in their path: a group of ten enemies - ten arrows, ten deaths, and the squad went on.

The most terrible battle broke out at the walls of the palace. As it turned out, it was not in the center of the city, but adjacent to the city wall, but this was not stupid - the part of the palace that looked out beyond the wall was hidden from view by a dense, impassable forest. And the wall itself in this place was incomparably higher. The palace itself caused delight - yes, it was a child's delight. It was like a huge toy that you could play with or break into many pieces.

To defend the palace, almost an entire army poured into the square in front of him, and instantly two waves clashed in a terrible duel. This time, not everything went so smoothly for the Persians. The advantage was clearly not on their side - they began to suffer the first losses. The arrows of the Indians were soaked in poison, and even the smallest wound soon took a person's life.

Arrows whistled over the Prince's head. The old ideas of his own invincibility and self-confidence evaporated, but this did not prevent him: he was one of the first to push back the Indians and managed to break into the palace. There were about ten Persians in this detachment. He even knew one of them, Firose, personally.

Running inside, the Prince stopped and looked around - it was much quieter here, the guards who remained inside the palace apparently did not yet understand what was going on, and were in no hurry to drive away the uninvited guests - this time the effect of surprise worked.

Inside, the palace looked much more beautiful. It was no longer a toy, it was a delight to the eye, beauty reigned everywhere: exquisitely painted walls, mosaics depicting some great battles, and a white marble floor that shone blindly in the eyes. Each step echoed endlessly through the hall. The staircase was of the same marble, covered with a rich carpet, with wide steps and unimaginably high.

A terrible blow was heard and felt at the same time, it shook the walls of the palace, for the first second it seemed that it would collapse. And so it was in part. From somewhere above, a huge block of stone began to fall silently.

Fear and incomprehension could be seen in his eyes. Fear is not for yourself. For someone else's life. For many other people's lives. Fear for the future. Misunderstanding - how did it all happen this way and what will happen next?

A strange, incomprehensible fear, not the kind that people usually have in the face of death. It seemed that he was not afraid of her, although he fought as best he could. One against all. All the guards had fled or had already been defeated. His left hand ached from a terrible wound - a deep cut, and the blood flowed non-stop, it stained his clothes and was now dripping onto the floor. Massive rare red drops one after another seemed to count down the last moments of his life.

The whistle of the arrow cut through the air... Past! A little more life. A little pain and fear. Why fight if you die? Why die when you can fight?

And he pounced on another enemy. The clashing of swords. A blow, another blow, a scream. He was a skilled warrior and was not afraid of battle, although he strongly disliked them. Alone he could hold out against a whole squad. Face to face, but not...

A terrible scorching stab in the back. Slow and therefore causing even more pain. And the feeling that he did not manage to die immediately - now in the last minutes the terrible thought will not let go, it will finish off and leave no chance. He could not, did not

cope, could not resist, could not endure. He let everyone down. Everything went dark, and Maharaja fell dead.

Amar, the traitorous vizier, towered over his body. It was he who struck. From the back, taking advantage of the already blunted attention of his maharaja. Now he was proud of himself, of being able to do what a whole band of Persians could not do. Moreover, they could have left him alive. And this would simply be unacceptable.

By taking the life of Maharajah, he took the life of everything - the city was doomed. The treasury will be plundered, many have already been killed, and so many more will be killed. A huge fire will engulf the entire city, much will be destroyed by merciless, incredibly powerful catapult shots. Porridge will turn into ruins. Into a pile of fragments and a sea of tears.

As soon as the Prince had walked a few steps, a moment later, with a terrible crash that resembled the scream of hundreds of voices, the block hit the floor, shattering into many pieces and fragments exactly where he had recently stood. His heart pounded harder than usual. At another time, the Prince would have stopped, dumbfounded by what had happened. But something was calling him on. He ran into the nearest hallway, catching sight of the figure of Firouz in it. He didn't even pay attention to the fact that none of the shrapnel had touched him. The prince was only drenched in clouds of dust, and his ears rang a little.

Carelessly pulling out the dagger, he turned it in his hands, blood dripping from it, it gleaming in the sunshine, a foul cold gleam like the vizier's eyes. Inhuman eyes, looking at death through someone else's blood. He feared his own death like nothing else.

"Find your king and tell him that his will has been done." Remind him of his promise. I'll wait for him here! Amar said to the two Persian soldiers.

And then he coughed. At first it seemed harmless, but then he almost collapsed - a terrible illness tormented him. The handkerchief with which he covered his mouth was painted the crimson color of his own blood, the sight of which frightened him and made him even angrier. Staggering, but controlling himself, Amar looked menacingly at the soldiers, and they rushed to Shahraman with a report.

Approaching one of the windows, the vizier enjoyed the spectacle of the battle. The air above the city was filled with smoke, and the shouts almost did not penetrate here. Most of the Persian

army had already penetrated the city. The Indian soldiers were broken up into small detachments, there was no longer any organization or order, they were doomed – they were driven only by a fanatical desire to live.

Then he felt the taste of his own blood. It was strange, why had he noticed it only now? Frozen for a moment, he strode away from the window, toward the center of the room, leaning on his staff. For some reason, he felt like a master in this huge reservoir of pain.

Dawn is like dawn: a light cold breeze, the chirping of birds and the soft sunlight creeping into the room. It looks like it was raining overnight. But she did not remember - she lay all night as if in oblivion.

Something hurt her heart. No premonitions, just a feeling of emptiness. The absence of something or even someone.

She sat up on the bed and rubbed her eyes. I still wanted to sleep, but lying down was excruciatingly painful. It's unbearable, as if on the tips of the world's sharpest blades. It was as if they were all piercing her heart at the same time. And each of them she felt individually, her heart was ready to burst into a million pieces, to shatter into a thousand pieces. It beat rapidly, driving the blood to her temples, making Farah dizzy. Never before had she felt so anxious.

Somehow controlling herself, she felt for her sandals and pulled them on one by one. Still staggering and holding her heart, she stepped out into the open air to breathe in the aroma of morning, to feel the last splashes of the night's coolness. But some other smell reached her, not the one she was used to smelling every morning. Smoke, the smell of something burning. In the next second, the wind carried a fragment of someone's scream to her ears, and it had a sobering effect on her. She simply forgot about the aching heart, beat after beat, shaking her from the inside, as if it were something insignificant.

The next moment, she rushed into the room, and then out of it. A strange silence enveloped everything around. Headlight stopped and looked around. Not a soul. Usually, the palace guards were visible nearby - now there was no one. She walked and for some reason already knew that she would not see anyone around the next corner again. And he won't hear anything. Only the beating of his heart and the sound of his own steps.

As she approached the throne room, another abrupt cry reached her. She glanced out the nearest window—there were many of them

in this part of the palace—and her knees trembled and a lump rose to her throat. Now everything became clear to her.

Without knowing how, she reached the throne room, but did not enter it immediately - some premonition stopped her. Her mind still refused to fully accept what was happening, and she needed time, at least a few seconds, before she could force herself to go further. Entering the hall, she saw the vizier, his strange authoritative gait, posturing. The lump came even closer to her throat. Tears welled up in my eyes. She was suffocating. The mind floated away, everything seemed to lose its meaning in an instant, collapse, shatter. Father... That was whose absence she felt, and now her heart ached even more.

She couldn't afford to sob. No, it didn't matter to her that she would be heard and seized. Why fight if you're already dead? In those moments, she simply stopped living. Statue. Alive, but dead. Pulled out of the river of life, it was a huge, unhealed wound on the water surface. And each next second was more painful than the previous one. It was as if someone had destroyed this statue as well, breaking it into pieces with heavy blows, into sharp shards carved by pain and cutting feet through any sole.

Catching up with Fyrose, the Prince called out to him faintly. They needed to get into the treasury, which meant they had to work together. It was not easy to find their way in an unfamiliar place, but it was as if someone was leading them.

They came very close to the treasury. Even before they saw the entrance, they guessed it: the decoration of the palace was becoming more and more magnificent, lighted torches were burning everywhere. And then, around the next turn, Prince and Fyrose saw an entrance. It is unlikely that there could be anything else behind such doors: skillfully finished, but at the same time massive and high, they served as an excellent protection for the treasury of Maharaja.

The guards never left these doors. And even now it is no exception. Six tall soldiers guarded the entrance. There was no fatigue on their faces, although they probably did not sleep that night. It seemed strange to the prince at this moment that the treasury was guarded as if gold could have any meaning now.

"Or maybe there is something more than just gold? Then why are there so few guards?" - thoughts one by one stung his mind, inflamed with interest and excitement.

The next moment, the two of them rushed to the entrance. The guards were indeed well chosen - they reacted instantly to the strangers, they could not be taken by surprise, but it still seemed as

if the general despair had reached them. They fought, but as if half-heartedly. Without excitement and zeal. Or is it just the impression of a perky youth? The prince struck the nearest of the guards almost instantly, simply knocked the life out of him, took it away and threw it away. The second was struck down by Fyrose. He fought like a lion: being very tall and large, he had an advantage in strength. He was not as agile as the Prince. His punches were powerful and his defense was impenetrable. Then another death followed. The doors were spattered with blood. By this point, one could feel how despair had really permeated the survivors. In the eyes of one one could be seen indifference, unwillingness to fight or even move. The second was frightened and seemed to be plotting to escape. The third rushed at the strangers, gathering the remnants of his will into a fist, but not to strike, but rather just to die.

The toy was broken, disassembled into parts, which now lay separately from each other, without any meaning.

The last obstacle - the large high doors, the entrance to the treasury - did not want to open, as if they were locked from the inside. They were too massive to knock out with a foot or shoulder. Searching for the keys on the bodies of the guards led to nothing, and there was not even a keyhole on the door. It was necessary to find another way.

The Prince and Fyrose walked down the unfamiliar corridors again. Feeling a light breeze, the Persians turned right into the corridor and were not mistaken - they went out onto a balcony overlooking a small courtyard. At the bottom, you could see a door similar to the one at the entrance to the treasury, but on this one you could see the lock. However, it was simply impossible to find the key and go down there - it was too high, and it was necessary to waste precious time again to find another way. And curiosity was now getting the better of both. The desire to assert themselves, to satisfy their interest - this is what drove both of them, and this is how they were similar. Everything lies behind those doors. The treasures of the universe, capable of revealing all truths - all this was drawn by their imagination, they seemed to think together, and this made the heat of their curiosity even hotter.

Approaching the edge of the balcony, the Prince found that high above the doors, just at the level of the balcony, there were windows that now carried the light of the sun into the treasury. Estimating the distance, he realized that he could simply jump into the nearest of the windows if he ran better. And he didn't even think about what he would be there, on the window, how he would climb down or come back if he failed. A leap towards fate... or against her!

"Go back to the doors where the guards stood..." or not! Go and bring people so that you can break down those doors if I can't open them from the inside myself," the Prince said to Fyrose.

The headlight sat there, frozen, as if forever. Large tears slowly crept down her cheeks and dripped onto the cold marble floor.

In this state she was seized - it seemed that it did not affect her at all, as if it was not she who was captured, but someone else, completely indifferent to her. Her eyes expressed some understanding of what was happening, but these moods were very changeable, only occasionally breaking through her tears. Urged on by some soldier, she walked, if it could be called steps. She stepped as if on the edge of a knife, wounding her legs on the fragments of her own tears. She did not even look at the vizier, for there would not have been enough room in her for anger and a desire for revenge. There was not even room for life in her, she held on to the princess by some miracle. A miracle that Farah would also hate if she could. And so she simply collapsed, unable to endure the suffering, and plunged into oblivion.

The jump turned out to be successful for the Prince, and doubly: firstly, he stood firmly on his feet, and, secondly, it was not difficult to go down. Long sheets of fabric, resembling curtains, began just above the windows and descended to the floor.

Taking hold of the canvas with gold letters embroidered on it and resting his feet on the wall, the Prince smoothly slid down in just a few seconds. The closer he got to eternity, the faster time passed. Now he could look around again. It was quite light down here, the sun, which was already hanging quite high, brought a lot of light through the windows. But the glow also came from an unusually large hourglass standing on the left. The prince had seen an hourglass the size of a human head, but no more; these were almost twice the height of a man! Looking at everything else, he realized that it was light here because there were placers of gold everywhere, and everything around had the same hue. Even the walls shone with this cold yellow color.

The strange thing was that the Prince had hardly noticed any of this from above, as if it had no meaning at all. And down here, it all seemed so all-consuming and important. If he had time, he would definitely think about all this. But he didn't have time, someone took away all the time of the world from him. Suddenly, he turned around

and walked away from the watch, as if looking for something else. Something was calling him to it, the Prince felt as if the sense of time had returned to him again; And this time he perceived him much more acutely, as if he had become related to him. There was an incomprehensible ringing in the Prince's ears, he did not feel reality, he was immersed in some new, unknown element. With each step, this feeling intensified, and each step reverberated in his head with a new ringing.

In the midst of all this golden glow, cold and indifferent to the Prince, a faint bluish glow caught his attention. It was the hilt of a dagger that shone. He took it and at that moment finally plunged into this element. They seemed to merge with the dagger into one, into something inseparable and unpredictable.

Then the Prince had a new feeling, as if the elements were letting him go, just for a short time, like a dolphin that had burst out of the abyss for a split second to bathe in the incredibly warm rays of the setting sun. At that very moment, thoughts flashed before him that he could, coped, proved the right to be a real son of his father. About the fact that honor and glory for him are now the very rays of the setting sun that captured him for a second and are unlikely to just let him go, even when he plunges back into the unknown element.

All this time, there was an unbearable silence around for a normal person. But the Prince could hardly be called normal now - it seemed that he existed outside this world or as if in parallel with it - he could freely leave whenever he wanted, and then return. Then the silence was broken by a loud bang on the doors.

"Fyrose is back," the Prince said to himself, barely audible.

This knock instantly brought him back to reality. Or so it seemed to him. The next blow turned out to be fatal for the doors: they simply could not withstand it - one leaf literally shattered into pieces, the other fell entirely, flying off the hinges. The fallen door made even more noise in this realm of silence. After that, the Prince rushed to the resulting passage - several soldiers, the vizier and the Prince's father were already entering it. Of course, their attention was also attracted by watches and placers of gold everywhere.

"Your Majesty, I hope you remember your promise..." The vizier, without finishing, heard the king's answer:

- Yes, yes, of course! Choose among everything that is here. Except for this watch. They will be a good gift for my friend!

"Then I choose this dagger!" The vizier, with devilish greed in his eyes, pointed to the trophy the Prince had just obtained. The Prince himself was standing nearby.

"Well, Amar!" You won't take away the trophy of the young warrior's first victory, will you? Let him keep the dagger, choose something else!

Sparks of anger sprang from the vizier's eyes. More coughing, the taste of his own blood, and more rage. He gripped his staff tighter than usual, wiped the blood from his lips with his handkerchief, and hobbled away without a word.

The prince experienced another strange feeling during this whole scene. He could have given the dagger to the vizier under normal circumstances. He didn't really need it. But he was giving him something, and the Prince could not tear himself away from the blade, as if he were really attached to it. The most he could do was sheath it, but in doing so, the Prince knew that the dagger was near, no one was going to take it away, and so he was calm.

"Well... If the Prince does not want to let go of his new toy, so much the better: he will die from it! The vizier hissed faintly through a barely restrained storm of anger and rage.

Chapter 6. It's time

Endless desert and endless caravan. It seemed to stretch from horizon to horizon, just like their journey. Many days ago, the Persians left the destroyed and burned Kashi. Now their path lay irrevocably to Azad, to an old friend of the Persian king. Although, perhaps, it is difficult to talk about such a concept as friendship when it concerns two rulers. A lot of gifts - this is what could easily provide cordiality on his part. And in return - hospitality. An endless caravan - people, horses, camels - an endless stream. Of course, not everything had to get to Rifath - no ruler would offend himself. However, the huge hourglass was still meant for him. External brilliance, mysterious beauty and lack of any use. The main thing is that they make an impression, and nothing else is needed.

The sun was unbearably hot. I was constantly tormented by thirst and headache. There is a sea of sand around. Everywhere. And even in the watch there is sand.

The prince was still impressed. Glory. Honor and glory were what was spinning in his head. He dreamily remembered every second, every moment of that day. In many ways, he was just lucky, but his successes blinded him, he was pleased with himself. Pleased to be the son of his great father, a fearless warrior, to have been the first to enter the treasury.

The whole day dragged on very slowly and somehow especially painfully. Perhaps because everyone is already tired of the journey. Dune was replaced by dune. Stones, sparse vegetation and sand. And a lot of footprints in the sand. Very soon the wind will blow, and they will disappear, as if there were no Persian army in these parts.

The prince met the eyes of one of the captives a couple of times. Once - briefly, the second time - longer: he became interested. Her eyes were filled with sadness, but at the same time, the gaze was very strong, completely inconsistent with her image, fragile and tender. And most of all it was surprising that there was no real anger and desire for revenge in them - only sadness and, perhaps, resentment.

But all this occupied the Prince's mind only for a few minutes, after which his thoughts again smoothly switched to the experience of recent events. He walked a few more steps on the scorching sand even through the sole, holding the bridle in his hand, then jumped on his horse and rushed forward. There was no wind on this day, so he was very happy with the breeze, albeit hot.

Lazy conversations were heard among the soldiers. They also recalled recent events. One of those who were in the very front rows told how he miraculously managed to survive when he confronted three Indian soldiers at once.

"There were at least seven of them, I swear!" Maybe even ten or so!

There was a burst of laughter. Apparently, no one believed him:

"Come on, you've gone completely mad from the heat," one of the people walking next to him answered him.

But he stubbornly continued his story:

"One of them even wounded me, look!" He said, showing his hand to everyone. -You see? And then...

As he spoke, the soldier interrupted once, pulled a flask of water from his belt, took a sip, and then continued, but his words were lost in the general hubbub, though it seemed that the Prince heard another burst of laughter.

Not far away, the Prince saw Fyrose, the same warrior with whom he had taken the final steps on the way to his goal. He was recounting the exact moment when he and the Prince ran to the treasury, to the very first door. The prince stopped his horse, then jumped off it and walked beside him, listening to the story. I remembered everything again. Again and again. How they ran to the treasury, how they dealt with the guards, how he, already alone, went to meet the call, how his fingers closed around the hilt of the dagger for the first time. And now, perhaps without noticing it, he took out a dagger and gripped it tightly in his hand, as if connecting with it, transferring all his thoughts about those moments of the past into it. And then he stopped, extremely surprised. And he would have stood dead in his tracks, if not for the horse, slowly but surely pulling him forward. And the reason for such a stop was: a second... no, a little more, but still quite recently, he was walking, listening to Fearous's story, and heard words like: "And I ran as fast as I could...", and the next moment something cracked faintly, clicked in his ears, and then... He heard the words again. Exactly. And the same hand gesture. In addition, the Prince noticed that he himself was stepping on the same stone for the second time. Then he looked at the dagger in his hand in surprise—he only noticed that he was holding it—and a daring thought came to him, insane in its essence, but so clinging that he could no longer free himself from it: a dagger could manipulate time.

The prince walked on and mentally repeated what he had just done recently - reliving those recent events, trying to remember everything in as much detail and accuracy as possible, trying to plunge headlong into Time, to catch its powerful but imperceptible flow.

And here it is! Again! Again, he heard the same short phrase twice, but this time he noticed that he had stepped a little differently, not like a moment ago. He was struck by what he had experienced. And he survived twice. I tried this and that. His most daring and

insane guess came true, he was not mistaken. And he, with the face of a child who deceived the whole world, hid his dagger, jumped on his horse and flew to the head of the caravan, raising clouds of dust and sand.

The prince was completely absorbed and even discouraged by his discovery. It even made him seriously forget about all the nonsense, such as the honor of a warrior or something that until recently was spinning in his head, being almost the meaning of life.

At this time, a little farther away, the soldiers were giving the prisoners water, not allowing them to die of thirst and sweltering heat, not thinking that they might want to die as soon as possible. It looked disgusting: the prisoners were treated like animals, they were simply doused with water from head to toe, thus bringing them to their senses and inflaming their thirst even more. Those rare drops that the prisoners licked from their lips intoxicated them, they helplessly reached for water again and again, after each random drop of it. Farah sometimes felt a salty taste in the water - it was due to her tears; the silent sobs that tore her apart were expressed in these rare tears. Moments like these brought her out of her unconsciousness, and when she returned from the world of dreams, she felt the pain even more acutely, her chin trembled, and after a few minutes she left reality again.

The prince, breaking free from the lazy stream, galloped forward, towards something new and, as he thought, beautiful. From the outside, it looked rather unusual: a small speck, separated from all the others, it continued to move, completely independent, obeying no one and nothing - neither the terribly slow crawling caravan, nor the intensified headwind. He raised whirlwinds of sand and mercilessly threw millions of grains of sand into the Prince's face, and with such zeal that he felt each one, but still not paying any attention to all this.

At that moment, another thought came to the Prince, even more daring and crazy. Without slowing down, he tried to concentrate all his attention on what he thought would happen in the next second: he tried to anticipate every gust of wind, to feel it even before it blew, tried to imagine the next moments of each of the grains of sand swarming in the air. His consciousness seemed to flow completely into the dagger - he did not follow the road at all, and the mount briskly carried him forward and slightly to the right, gradually moving away from the caravan. But it was all to no avail: the dagger seemed to have turned into an ordinary silver blade. Even its bluish glow seemed to have faded; like the sun covered by a lunar disk - this

was how the Prince's so strongly concentrated consciousness acted on the dagger. But gradually, realizing that absolutely nothing was happening this time, the Prince seemed to return to the real world. He moved his horse a little to the left and began to approach the caravan again, as if he was being pulled back into this stream. The Prince then looked at the dagger carefully, holding it so that he could see both the blade and the hilt at the same time. At first, he was more interested in the hilt: when he brought it close to his eyes, he saw inside through a faint yellowish glow the same clouds of sand dust that were now blowing up everywhere, but everything seemed to be in miniature - a small world hidden from human view. Then this movement slowly crept somewhere higher, as if spilling over a dagger, seeping through the guard higher and higher, to the point. The piercing silver shine, despite the unusually bright sun, was replaced by a dimmer matte glow, but no longer yellow, but sparkling blue.

The prince, slowing down as carefully as he could, keeping as few details in mind as possible, tried to remember the dagger, or rather, its appearance at the moment when it first forced him to act. Still carefully and unhurriedly, descending the steps of his consciousness, the Prince remembered more and more clearly that at that moment the dagger did not stop emitting this soft blue light for a second. Yes, at that moment he really worked. The prince even remembered (though it may have been just imagination) that the dagger seemed to glow a little stronger, and its hilt became cooler, giving off a pleasant chill in his hand, the very thing that was so lacking in this place, mercilessly burned by the hot desert sun. The dagger seemed to react to even the smallest and most timid memories that surfaced in the Prince's mind, and he remembered exactly what he wanted to remember. This inflamed his interest even more, he slowed down his faithful steed even more - it switched to a light trot. Now the Prince resembled a child who finally got the cherished toy and did not know what to do with it. Now he checked the dagger, remembering some small detail from his childhood, one that he barely remembered, and then again plunged into the memories with all his consciousness, as if pouring into a dagger, or rather, merging with it, and they remembered together. The memories drawn by the dagger were somewhat familiar to the Prince, they were stored in his memory as they were—the dagger did not lie; and he also brought something new to these memories, perhaps hitherto unknown to the Prince himself: some details, something that really happened, but for some reason escaped his attention. From this, memories, becoming unimaginably bright and strong, seemed to turn into reality, flow and merge into it, and then

replace and push it away. Moreover, the latter did not seem to resist, as if she was tied hand and foot, not allowing her to move.

Illusions, unimaginable dreams and thoughts for a normal mind, captivated the Prince's mind unnoticed by himself. Nevertheless, he still retained a sober mind, albeit not the same as before, now he was thinking about the dagger, about its power, capabilities and purpose.

The dagger is subject to time, or rather, the past and the present - now it was already clear as day. But the future is hidden from him as well as from people, at the thought of it his strength goes out like a candle, as if he is afraid of the future. But these powers are easily restored when the mind begins to cling - and the dagger with it - to shreds of memories, even the most insignificant or not at all personal memories of the person who possessed it. He remembered it vaguely, but the next second it was full of memories... other people's memories, but so vivid that they blinded the mind - the Prince even felt uncomfortable - he almost lost his balance and fell out of the saddle - so dazzling were the other people's memories.

Not yet losing the last shreds of sanity, the Prince decided to postpone this game with the dagger for the time being, perhaps until he better understood its nature and purpose. Although something inside the Prince told him that he would experience all these feelings more than once, his hand would squeeze the dagger more than once, his consciousness would sink into the abyss of time more than once.

Coming to his senses as if from unconsciousness, the Prince sheathed the blade, trying to forget about it, as if fleeing from it through the labyrinths of time into the future, although it was not so easy.

The wind, which had abruptly changed direction, was now blowing at the Prince's back, as if urging him on, trying to protect him from some invisible danger. The danger of this was the Prince's very thoughts - they still stung him one after another, but not so clearly, his shortness of breath returned to normal, evened out. The wind, stirring up the sand, drove the Prince's thoughts away, as far as the wind could. Thoughts, mixing with sand and dust, were lost in the endless desert - where it would be impossible to find them.

Finally catching up with the head of the caravan, the Prince slowed down, inhaled the hot air and, standing on the sand, slowly wandered, listening to the conversation he had recently begun.

"Azad is about a day's journey from here. It's part of today, it's night, and tomorrow morning you have to get there. Along the way, you will come across several settlements, mostly beggarly, the only real value they possess is drinking water," one of the guides, the one who was a little shorter and darker, blurted out once, but politely and with respect in his voice.

The second guide with all his appearance expressed agreement with the first, and stroked the neck of his camel - a faithful friend and a very good means of transportation.

During his story, the first guide waved his arms a lot, but he paid special attention to one of the directions: Azad was in the northwest, a little to the right of the place where the sun was about to set. Having finished his short speech, the conductor threw a barely noticeable glance at his partner:

"We did our job - everything was as we agreed," the second one squeezed out immediately, but with force.

And then, with a very respectful expression on their faces, they looked inquiringly at the king. The latter, in turn, exchanged glances with Tuammak, barely audibly threw him a couple of phrases and, receiving an approving nod, said:

"Good pay for good service!"

At that moment, Tuammak pulled out a rather weighty bag from his backpack, which jingled from time to time - it contained gold.

"There is a little more here than we agreed at the very beginning of the journey," Shahraman said.

In the next instant, the bag, flying through the air, plopped down directly into the hands of the second guide. Judging by the weight, there was definitely more gold in it than they had agreed.

Without saying a word more, but expressing gratitude and happiness with all their appearance, the guides, bowing, saddled the camels, turned them in the direction opposite to the movement of the caravan, and moved home. For another minute, the ears of the Tsar, his retinue, and the Prince could hear the clearly satisfied chatter of these two, but in some other, completely incomprehensible language.

Chapter 7. Following the Heart

The two riders raced along the dusty road, parched by the sun, as well as the faces of the riders by fatigue. And pain. They have had to go through a lot in recent days. They knew the pain, the fear, the despair, and the fanatical courage that kept them both on the edge of the abyss and kept them from falling into that abyss. We learned the taste of blood. The taste of death. The pain of losing friends and loved ones. And so now their journey along the dusty road, supplemented by unimaginable fatigue, was a pleasure for them. Some kind of goal loomed ahead. Or an illusion, but one that gave hope.

It became a new reference point in their minds. Just as the most fragile twig gives an extraordinary amount of confidence to movement in space when, it would seem, the last point of support is slipping from under your feet and each next step threatens to fall. In itself, it is not a support - it is very easy to break it with any sudden movement. And yet it does not break. And a person does not fall. The twig seems to harden, absorbing a person's faith, and a person believes even more, continuing his shaky path.

Two of those who were not defeated. Both were wounded - abrasions, bruises and several bandages were visible from under half-torn clothes - apparently the most severe wounds. A few days ago, they did not know each other. Ajit served in the palace as the head of the guard. On that ill-fated morning, he was one of those who stood up for him. One of those who fled for their lives when the main Indian forces were defeated. But it was not cowardice - he wanted to protect his children, his wife and all the people close to him. In those moments, he hated himself - he knew that with every step he took, he was betraying his Maharaja and his city more and more. Despite all the promises made and the unpayable debt that Ajit was in. And it is not even worth describing what happened to him when he found out that all the people close to him died. He couldn't, he couldn't do it, he let everyone down. But he himself was never defeated. For this he hated himself. He felt that he was able to move on with his life. Despair could not swallow him.

Asha was one of those who fell under the first wave of the attack. He fought bravely at the walls of the city. He fought even braver inside the city. Then he was wounded by an arrow in the right shoulder. The first thing he remembered was not pain, but just weakness spreading from the shoulder all over the body, then along the arm. Then he heard the sound of metal on the stones, and his hand released his sword. Then oblivion, a very aching wound - he hadn't even seen it all the time, but he constantly felt it, and that was enough. And there was a similar feeling in him - he knew that he would live on. Or rather, he did not know, but hoped. I hoped very

much, not knowing why. And now, looking at the sunset, feeling the breath of the warm wind and its whistling in his ears, he continued to hope for something.

It is a little strange that fate brought these two people together. They were quite different. At least by age. Asha is a brave young warrior, daring and unpredictable. In some ways, he resembled the Prince, and not only in appearance. He had his illusions. He, too, was visited by thoughts of military honor. Partly because of this, he tried to serve his maharadzha faithfully: he had no family, the life of a soldier was close and familiar to him. And he was not going to change anything. Ajit was much older than his young partner, he was about forty years old, while the first was a little over twenty. Asha, wounded in the shoulder, did not endure even a tenth of the pain that Ajit endured, although not a single wound on the latter's body was so serious. Pain raged inside him, in his soul, in his head, in his heart. It pounded feverishly every time he remembered anything from that morning. And yet, for some reason, fate brought them together. Not for fun. Not for verification. For survival, for achieving a common goal. A goal that none of them would have achieved alone. It was the combination of characters that gave them special strength.

They collided quite by accident. And everything that happened before that was also a million accidents intertwined into a single fate. A fate that determines their entire future life. This fate is one huge accident, consisting of many other, smaller ones, which happens to a person once in a lifetime and haunts him constantly, until death.

Ajit walked from the direction of the funeral pyres, looking dejected and tired. He just walked, paying no attention to anything. He wandered aimlessly, sometimes in circles. The only thing that came to his mind was that he needed to be as tired as possible in order to fall asleep during the night, and not be tormented by heavy thoughts, as it had been the previous two nights. The food he tasted had lost its flavor. The whole world has lost its usual order of things. And, probably, Ajit would have been lost among these gloomy thoughts, if suddenly his attention had not been attracted by a sound that seemed almost strange to him - he had managed to get out of the habit of people - someone was moving towards him.

He saw a young man on horseback approaching him, and the sound that snatched him out of the world of loneliness was the clatter of hooves and the clang of stirrups. Asha, who had only come to his senses after being wounded in the morning, after lying almost unconscious for two days before, was heading away from the city. He wanted to catch up with the Persians - he did not know why, but he was definitely going to do it, something was pulling him there. Something big. The pain that Asha experienced from the wound was completely different from what Ajit had experienced. In the first one,

the pain manifested itself more strongly physically, he felt it for three days, and it did not let him go, but his hope, all his aspirations helped him to fight, gradually reducing the pain to nothing. And he remembered each of these days, of course, not in detail, but despite the oblivion, they lasted for him exactly as long as three ordinary days pass. When Asha woke up this morning, he gathered his strength and brought himself to his senses. He treated and wound his wound as best he could and hit the road. Ajit, who had lost everything in his life three days ago except herself, did not feel the time, sometimes it seemed to him that a month had passed. Or a year. A year of unabated, throbbing pain that flared up like a fire at the slightest breath and burned him from the inside. Sometimes it seemed to him that this was retribution for the past.

Asha stopped. Or rather, it flew past at first, but stopped almost immediately. Firstly, there were few people in the city, most of the survivors had already managed to leave these places in the first two days and only a few remained to restore normal life.

At first, he just wanted to ask a couple of questions, to find out more about the latest events, about the Persians, about rumors in the city. But for some reason, feeling that the conversation would be long, he jumped off his horse, lightly and smoothly, trying to move his shoulder as little as possible, which made his movements a little clumsy.

Ajit spoke first. This even frightened the young man: the sight of his new acquaintance betrayed a stubborn silent person in him, and Asha did not expect such a turn of events.

"Who are you, young warrior?" Ajit's first words were a question. He wanted to know where Asha was in such a hurry, but first he had to find out who he was talking to.

"My name is Asha, I am a soldier of the great Maharajah; Before the attack, he served in the guard garrison at the main gate. Now I'm looking for people from whom I can find out at least something about the Persians, about Maharaj, oh..." he stammered, because he had said everything that was necessary, and could not, no matter how hard he tried, invent a word more.

"I'm Ajit," a dark-haired, middle-aged man, slightly shorter than the youngster, introduced himself. "Maharaja is dead. Most of the soldiers and residents of the city also died. I used to be the head of the palace guard, but now it doesn't make sense..."

His gaze fell on Asha's shoulder and the way he unnaturally moved it when walking. Through the rags of his clothes and the poor bandage on his shoulder, a wound appeared, apparently quite serious, but already slightly healed and almost not bleeding. Ajit also noticed his gait - it was still uncertain. He did not limp, but he walked somehow too carefully.

Asha told him about his first encounter with the Persians, about his wound, about his unconsciousness. Now Ajit understood why the soldier who had fought for Maharaja was completely unaware of all the recent events. Silently listening to the bright and colorful narration of the young warrior - yes, despite his years, Asha was already a warrior both in body and spirit - Ajit reflected on his life. The pain did not subside or recede, but for the first time he thought about what would happen next. Meanwhile, Asha finished his story. His thoughtful interlocutor, noticing this, but not showing it, continued to sit silently, running his foot on the sand. And, sitting on a stone, he gestured for Asha to sit on the next one, and told him his story, longer and sadder. Grief was common to everyone now, but Ajit just needed to talk it out. And freed from the shackles, from the huge burden on his shoulders (even if only for a while), Ajit unexpectedly picked up Asha's idea to catch up with the Persians and supported it, saying:

"It's dangerous for you to go alone. I can be useful.

Although he knew inwardly that he was going to certain death, Ajit saw deliverance in it.

Already after sunset, in those minutes when it had just set below the horizon, but it was still light enough, most of the people from the caravan really saw a small settlement, blackened in the distance, to their right. And then his silhouette dissolved into the darkness of the night, covering the world swiftly, like an arrow piercing its victim, with lightning speed and unconditionality. Without the sun, the desert rested, the air was fresh, the sand was no longer scorching, a cool wind blew and the presence of some kind of life was felt.

This time the caravan did not stop for the night. Despite the exhausting day spent on the road, everyone was reaching for the cherished goal - Azad. Some even claimed to have seen it, and during the day - apparently, it was an ordinary mirage.

The almost full moon was shining brighter; One after another, stars flashed in the sky. All this resembled some incredible performance staged by someone at the top in order to give pleasure to people. Enjoying the beauty and majesty of the starry sky. It filled everything around, flowed into everyone's consciousness, calmed down, relaxed, as if letting another day go away.

Their path lay to Azad. But they did not yet know this; Simply by questioning those they came across in the city, they learned that the

Persians had gone into the desert, to the northwest. Having gathered a very modest supply of food and water, having found a second horse for Ajit, the warriors set off in the morning. There was simply no point in staying in the city, although they were attached to it, each in his own way, but still very strongly. Each of them silently convinced himself that all this would not last long - they would either die, fighting for, as they believed, a just cause, or return here again, with a victory, albeit a small one, but a victory. According to rumors, they learned that the daughter of the Maharaja survived - the young princess Farah, perhaps the only living soul from the whole family. And her salvation was the only thing with which they could both honor the memory of their master, concelebrating with him for the last time, after his death. And for Ajit, it was also a matter of duty.

The sun was getting hotter and drier, and the air was getting drier: the desert was coming into its own, displacing all moisture and vegetation. The third day of the journey was coming to an end and was not much different from the first two - the same silence, silence, broken only by the clatter of hooves. Most of all, they told each other on the evening when they met, but now they simply had nothing to talk about. Rather, there was something to think about. The main thing was that they had a common goal, the rest did not make any sense at that time.

By the evening of the third day, however, Ajit decided to break the silence. A green grove appeared ahead, one of those that hide from inattentive travelers the most valuable treasure of the desert - water.

"Asha, take it a little to the left." There," he raised his hand and pointed to the grove, "most likely there is water.

Asha wanted to ask or object to something, but apparently appreciating the confidence with which his companion spoke his words, he obeyed, slowed down and jerked his horse slightly to the left.

Both were tired of the incessant silence and Asha, clinging to the situation, decided to continue the conversation:

"Do you know the desert?" Have you ever traveled there before?

"Yes..." Ajit hesitated, rubbing his jaw, which practically refused to move after so many hours of immobility. He took out a flask and drank the last sips of tasteless, warm water.

As soon as Asha opened his mouth to ask something else, Ajit continued, looking away.

- I have not always lived in this part of India. I was born in the desert, on the outskirts of the country, but I spent only part of my childhood there. My mother died a long time ago, I don't even remember her face. My father was killed by an Indian warrior, and quite accidentally, unwittingly. Apparently, he did not expect his

appearance and was very frightened by something, and at the first rustle he threw up his bow. The arrow struck him straight in the heart. This warrior put me, small and frightened, on his horse, which he led beside him. That's how I ended up in Kashi. It's strange, my life always changes so dramatically after the death of people close to me.

"How do you know all this so well?" You can't remember, can you? Asha asked in surprise.

"The man who picked me up became like a father to me, but he did not hide what had happened. He told me everything when I grew up.

In the meantime, they approached a small palm grove, and indeed, it surrounded a small lake with clear water. Stopping their horses, the travelers silently dismounted from them and went to fill their flasks.

Passing through a low bush, Asha frightened off a flock of some small colorful birds, and they rushed to the opposite side of the lake with an intermittent hoot. Involuntarily shuddering, he looked around: he had the feeling that not a single person had ever passed here, everything around seemed somehow untouched, pristine, unearthly.

Ajit approached the water first, put his hands in it, and, feeling the life-giving coolness, poured water over his face, trying not to miss a drop, and then drank greedily - drank as if for the last time in his life.

Chapter 8. Visiting the storm

The sun met the caravan as before, on its way. It struck everyone in the back, and everyone felt the blow, some even turned around - today the dawn was ominously red, not like usual, and with every second it grew, throwing hundreds of splashes on their backs, on the sand, across the sky, all over the world. The red sand on which the people walked now resembled a vast sea, an endless, frightening sea of blood. And the sun, rising menacingly above him, frightened him even more, making him redder and more boundless.

In general, it was strange that there was no halt at night - now someone was literally sleeping on the move, lazily moving his legs, someone was walking a little faster, but his face betrayed the same fatigue in him. Perhaps because of this, no one paid attention to what was happening around. The prince spent the whole night in the saddle, his horse slowly walking alongside the caravan, though by morning it had fallen behind his head.

On the contrary, Tuammak and Shahraman looked quite cheerful. Two experienced warriors who had suffered a lot in their lives, they were accustomed to this kind of marching and to such sleepless nights.

And only then did the Prince notice that a vizier was riding a little further away from his father. For some reason, he seemed pitiful now, sullen and wrinkled, and barely able to stay in the saddle. Even the rising sun seemed to burn him so hard that he fell into semi-oblivion. But, of course, a night without sleep was also to blame. His horse, as well as the rider, wandered half asleep, and together they caused only pity.

"I hope Rifath likes these birds!" They will be a great addition to his collection! Shahraman said, addressing Tuammak and someone else - one of the old warriors was riding not far from the king.

"What birds, father?" The Prince asked, distracted from watching the vizier and driving a little closer.

Shahraman was about to say something, but then the wind threw dust in his face, and he coughed.

"When the palace was already captured, your father and I and a small party walked around the neighborhood and came across a small but wonderful garden. Everywhere there were the same wonderful trees and bushes, and in the center there was a small fountain near which several birds were walking. We managed to catch seven of them - you can look at them, they are in golden cages somewhere in the middle of the caravan," Tuammak answered for him.

"Beautiful birds!" Shahraman cleared his throat.

The prince stopped his horse, turned it around, but did not move: he decided to simply wait until half of the caravan passed him and he saw these birds.

Time passed, and the sun rose higher and higher, scattering scorching heat everywhere. Now the desert was gradually turning into an ordinary one, the usual golden color that lurked in every grain of sand, in every stone, and in every dune that seemed to have no end. The prince felt a hot breeze mixed with the sand and closed his eyes. It took several minutes before he opened them again. And immediately he saw them. Black birds in golden cages, with golden beaks and elongated eyes. They were the size of a child and, apparently, tired of the heat and the long march, practically did not move.

Seeing them off, the Prince did not move again and did not even turn around - now he was looking at the sun, which was slowly climbing across the sky. He felt the growing wind ruffling his hair, and he felt a small drop of sweat run down his neck, slide down his back, and get lost there, absorbed into his clothes.

He stood there for a very long time, until almost the entire caravan sailed past him. With an effort to break away from his occupation, the Prince turned his horse and moved on. Almost instantly, he felt a twinge of unusual drowsiness, weakness in his arms, and heavy eyelids. A few minutes later he resembled Amar: he rode with his head bowed low and almost lost contact with the rest of the world; He only occasionally opened his eyes and inhaled deeper, feeling another breath.

The sand woke the Prince. Driven by the wind, it clogged in the eyes, in the ears, in the nose, whipped in the face and stuck to the hair. A terrible sandstorm was approaching. The wind became much stronger, the light of the sun became intermittent - every now and then the shadows of clouds of dust and sand flashed everywhere. The caravan continued to move, but slower and slower, people walked with their heads bowed, trying to somehow hide from the sand. But even now it was almost impossible, he penetrated everywhere, and nothing could block his way.

Only now, running his hand through his hair and brushing the dust off it, did the Prince realize how much the sun had managed to bake his head - it was amazing how he had ever endured so many hours alone with the sun.

He reached into his sack, rummaged through it, drowning his hand to the very bottom, and took out his camping headdress, the keffiyeh, which had saved him from the rain and the burning heat of

the sun more than once. Lying at the very bottom, it had not yet had time to absorb all the heat, and therefore it emanated a pleasant coolness, which the Prince immediately felt when he took it in his hand. For the last time, running his hand back and forth through his hair, the Prince threw it over his head, again felt a wonderful chill that woke him up completely. The keffiyeh had another remarkable property - thanks to the large blue strip of dense fabric that hung evenly from it and crept over his shoulders and back, his hair did not flutter so much and did not get so much sand into it, and the sun no longer burned his neck.

Clinging as tightly as possible to the horse, his head against his neck, the Prince rushed headlong, tearing apart the sand streams and raising new ones behind him.

Approaching the beginning of the caravan, the Prince opened his eyes a little wider and examined the vizier - he rode in a different way, slightly straightened, but was almost hidden from view by a huge piece of gray coarse fabric, covered with dust and constantly swayed by the wind. Another detail that the Prince noticed was that from time to time the vizier's staff appeared from under this fabric, and it was in an upright position, although last time it was lying on the back of the horse, across its movement. But the Prince did not attach importance to this detail - well, you never know why the old man held his shoddy stick like that? Maybe it was more convenient for him to hold the cloak, which was about to fly away? All thoughts on this topic left the Prince along with another gust of wind.

Shahraman rode with only a little leaning forward, shielding himself with his hand from the wind and dust, with his elbow slightly forward. Tuammak followed Amar's example and hid under a slightly smaller cloak, such that it covered him only to the waist. With one hand, he gripped both edges of his cloak tightly from the inside, so that the wind would not tear it off and carry it away, and with the other, only slightly letting it out from under his robe, he held the reins.

Clearing his throat loudly, Tuammak led his horse closer to Shahraman and said:

"Lord, I think we should stop. People are very tired from the heat and sleepless night, and I am afraid this storm will knock the last strength out of them.

"I think you're right. We must make a halt and wait out the storm," the king replied after a short pause, gazing intently into the distance. "Son, give the order to the whole caravan to stop!"

The prince turned and rushed in the opposite direction, and immediately felt how much easier and more pleasant it was to ride in the wind, feeling its breath only with his back. Now the wind seemed to be driving him and was no longer so terrible. At the last moment,

as the Prince left the beginning of the caravan, his gaze swept over the vizier's figure, picking out his wrinkled face hidden in the shadow of a kind of hood. And imperceptibly for himself, the Prince noticed one strange thing in this face - wide open eyes, as if not afraid of wind, sand and dust. They even seemed to burn with a faint, almost imperceptible light, which faded and then flared up again. The prince did not notice another small detail - Amar's lips were constantly moving, he was whispering something unintelligible, and anyone who saw something like this would surely have been terrified. But only the dagger could remember this elusive trifle. And he could hardly feel, and he could only speak from time to time.

The prince galloped towards the wandering people and, trying to block the wind, shouted:

-Stay! A strong storm is ahead!

A slight joy could be read on the emaciated faces, people instantly stopped, stopped the horses and camels, forcing the latter to lie down on the sand and knocking the horses into small groups of five or six animals and throwing pieces of wet cloth over their heads, and then happily fell on the hot sand and also covered themselves from the approaching sandstorm in all possible ways: they lay down close to the camels, hiding behind their backs, they threw pieces of thick fabric over themselves, wrapping themselves in them as carefully as possible, and moved flasks of water closer to them. All this, of course, did not help too much during such storms, but it was almost the only way to survive. And, apparently, out of pity for the prisoners, still keeping them tied, they threw them on the sand and even covered them from the wind with pitiful scraps of dirty and dusty cloth.

After a while, the news of the stop began to spread throughout the caravan, literally overtaking the Prince. Making sure that it had already flown around everyone, he rushed back to the front of the caravan. He rushed headlong across the sand, his face in the wind, as if trying to fly. All this made his eyes watery and aching. Riding up to his father, the Prince rubbed them with his hands, blinked a few times quickly, and jumped off his horse.

"My Prince!" Take this," the young man heard Tuammak's voice.

And reacting instantly, the next moment he met something large and soft in the air with his hand - a large canvas of heavy, but not too coarse fabric, after which he hurried to lie down on the sand and cover himself with it.

And then, literally in a matter of seconds, a storm came, bringing down myriads of grains of sand everywhere, and then kicking them up into the air, mixing with the wind and bringing them down again. Shutting his eyes tightly, the Prince felt the sand clinging to his face, clogged in his hair. It seemed that his protection

was completely useless - this fabric was nothing for such a wind, it pierced through it along with the dust. Like a huge wave, the storm, hitting the travelers in an instant, did not stop rolling its sandy waters throughout the caravan, scattering dust everywhere. Rare distant screams were heard - perhaps someone was losing his saving piece of cloth and was left alone with the raging elements.

The storm had been going on for hours. One day, in the midst of these shouts, the Prince heard a voice that did not resemble a cry; there was some kind of ... order. But in a second, this voice was lost in the whistling of the wind, which at that moment intensified even more, became colder and turned into thousands of small blades that pierced absolutely everything.

This went on for a few more minutes, and then, as if on cue, the storm began to subside abruptly. Another minute, and the sun's rays began to timidly break through the layer of sand that had settled on the cape. The incredible silence after so many hours of incessant noise and whistling hurt my ears. Ending this torture, the Prince jumped to his feet with a sudden movement, throwing off his cloak and raising clouds of dust around him. Meeting the sun's eyes, he recoiled and collapsed to the ground, his eyes, accustomed to the twilight, unable to cope with the bright light. Sitting on the sand, he turned away, rubbed his eyes with a dusty palm, and looked at the sun again. This time, the warm, gentle rays took him into their arms much more gently, without burning his eyes or blinding them.

Everywhere there was movement, rustling, everyone began to move away from the storm and slowly get out of their man-made shelters. Some acted very wisely and even before the storm and before covering themselves with pieces of dense cloth, they dug shallow holes in the sand, the length of their own height, thereby additionally protecting themselves.

The prince hurried to his horse and with a sharp movement he threw off a still slightly damp piece of the same dense matter from his head. The horse, as if waking up from a long sleep, jerked its head sharply, shook it from side to side, snorted and sneezed loudly. Its large nostrils were constantly moving, greedily drawing in fresh air compared to what it had been during the storm. Brushing the sand from his mane, tail and back, the Prince jumped into the saddle and rushed to inspect the caravan. Finally, he managed to notice how his father with a rather cheerful look got up from the ground, rubbed his eyes and disappeared from his sight. Now he saw the caravan slowly coming back to life, like some huge incredible creature recovering from a long and deep sleep.

As he drove by, he drew attention to the fact that not everyone could survive the storm. Someone was just lying unconscious, and even the life-saving drops of water rolling down their lips were not able to instantly bring these people back to their senses. And someone simply died. Their bodies lay in unnatural poses, the horror of death frozen in their eyes.

Capes who were unable to free themselves were stripped of their capes and taken back to a large wagon, where they were tied to poles as low as their height.

Suddenly, the Prince turned to a surprised and indignant sigh that came from somewhere to the side. He saw on the ground the same captive with whom he had already crossed eyes before. One of her hands was completely free, and a piece of rope was still dangling on the other. Leaning on both hands, trembling with fatigue and pain, she tried to get up. One of the soldiers, short in stature and with a predatory cruel look, noticed this and let out this very sigh of surprise. His eyes instantly lit up with imperious rage, and he ran up to the prisoner and kicked her in the side, so hard that she fell again, but not enough to leave a mark of the blow. A short sob was heard, which was drowned out by a soldier's cry full of unjustified contempt:

"Scoundrel!" Did you want to run away?

He grabbed the captive by the shoulder, roughly lifted her and gave her a resounding slap in the face, which instantly made her cheek redden, a tear rolled down it, and the poor thing fell down again. Then he sat down beside her, lifted her head by the hair, and hissed with a foul hiss:

"You won't want to next time!"

Something stirred inside the Prince, giving way to a short shiver in his back. But he did not even pay attention to this momentary impulse - what did he care about the pathetic girl who was to blame for such treatment of her? Then he watched as the soldier tied her hands again, this time unbearably tight, so that she closed her eyes in pain. When she opened them again, the Prince met her gaze and, as if frightened by something stronger than the storm he had recently experienced, turned away abruptly and rushed away.

Chapter 9. Azad

The storm delayed the caravan for almost a whole day's journey. In the morning, the Persians should have approached the walls of Azad, but now it was almost evening, and they had just set out again.

The prince did not immediately realize how long they had all waited out the storm.

"An hour, two - well, no more. But it's already evening," he said to himself.

Now, as if feeling cool, his mind worked in a special way. Thoughts rushed through his head one after another, some completely incoherent, and others lined up in a kind of chain, and one smoothly flowed into another. The prince looked at the wandering caravan and thought about how soon they would arrive in Azad. He only vaguely imagined the city from his father's stories, which were partially preserved in his memories from childhood. The sun scattered reddening rays on the sand, desperately throwing out the remnants of the day's heat. The prince, immersed in thought, was able to grasp this detail as well. Now his gaze was fixed on the ground, so he could not appreciate all the beauty of the picture that opened before his eyes. He just felt the sun weakening and gradually disappearing below the horizon. When the Prince was particularly immersed in thoughts or memories, his perception of reality was limited to an even simpler one: "something red is slipping away from him, and he can't catch up with it." However, he was not as far from this world as it might seem from the outside: his reaction was, on the contrary, sharper than usual. A few grains of sand stuck together, tossed in a gentle breeze, flew right into the Prince's face - a jerk of his head to the side, and they flew past. It took a few seconds before the Prince realized what he had done. Opening his eyes wide, he turned back, once again appreciated the suddenness of what had happened, and moved on. Or rather, his thoughts crept on, and he just turned his head and continued to jump, but now he was looking at the sun. Now it was difficult not to notice the full force of the sunset, literally hitting in the face. For a second, the Prince's thoughts fell silent, as if waiting for something, and then flowed again. His hearing caught a cry like a bird's. He looked around for someone who could publish it. He suddenly remembered the beaten prisoner, her eyes full of sadness, her cheek burning red, and... Of course! Those black birds! One of them, perhaps sensing the approach of night, woke up and let out this scream. It was a little frightening, and someone could even find it disgusting. Red-red sun. Red cheek... Tear. Dagger. Disgusting. That soldier acted disgustingly. The prince again felt that strange feeling, which he seemed to be frightened of, and rushed away. He was losing the sun,

he wanted to rush after it and never let it go, as if it were going over the edge of the earth for the last time and would never appear in the sky again. Why the hell does this prisoner attract almost all of his attention? The prince felt that every time he remembered her, his thoughts stopped, feelings like pity or sympathy rolled up to his heart, and he could not determine which one. The sun continued to run away, throwing red tears on the dry sand, turning it into a sea of coolness, returning the Prince's thoughts to their usual course for this evening.

He turned back sharply. The first star was already timidly breaking through the remnants of the day. The prince felt that all his thoughts were invisibly engulfed in time. He felt it and at the same time could not catch its move. He could react sharply to any trifle and at the same time did not notice how, immersed in his thoughts, he missed almost an entire hour of his own life. A huge red drop of blood slowly rolled down his arm and fell down into the darkness through the sand. Then the sand disappeared, and the Prince continued to see the drop for a long time. And nothing but her - he even seemed to melt in her light. And then the dagger sliced through the air, and the void turned back into a desert and a caravan. Azad was a majestic city, fortified and almost impregnable: it was surrounded by high white stone walls or sheer rocky slopes. White, not stained with blood. These thoughts didn't belong to the Prince himself, and he felt it, he didn't remember anything like it. The coolness of the night, merging with a slight burning sensation in my back, tirelessly fought against the last scraps of solar warmth, which was drying up before my eyes. But to win once does not mean to win at all: the sun with all its appearance promised to return. Red as a tear against white as the cold light of a lonely star. Thoughts took on stranger and stranger forms. They ceased to be thoughts. They were scraps of light of different colors that seemed to be fighting for a place in his head. The last beam slid across the yellow sand and disappeared, igniting millions of grains of sand one after another, thrown into the sky by someone's powerful but invisible hand.

"Be careful!" Once lost in the desert, you can stay in it forever! Tuammak's voice rang out somewhere nearby and instantly brought the Prince back to the real night.

"Yes..." the Prince drawled vaguely, rubbing his eyes.

He did not notice how thoughts seized him and dragged him into the distance, plunging his mind into a deep sleep. He moved a good distance away from the caravan, so much so that the caravan was barely visible, even under the light of the moon and stars. The prince shook his head, reviving himself, and galloped after Tuammak, feeling a new stream of thoughts, even more incoherent, swarming in his head.

Having drunk to their heart's content and filled with flasks of water, the two travelers moved on. Galloping past a kind of oasis, they, each silently, noted that they were finally in the desert. All vegetation disappeared from the earth, and only sand remained in its place. Dry and lifeless, like everything in the desert.

The travelers rode in silence again, each thinking about something different. Asha was still remembering the place they had left - it was somehow engraved in his memory in a special way. This place in the full sense of the word appealed to him. There was a sense of constant life in it, the exact opposite of the gloomy desert dunes. Everything everywhere you looked was pleasing to the eye, the sun shone somehow in a completely different way, in a way that does not shine anywhere else. From all these memories, a smile slowly spread across Asha's face, not too big to be called joyful, but not so small that it was not noticed. He noticed it himself and brushed it away, as something unnecessary in this harsh place.

There was absolutely nothing on Ajit's face. It wasn't smiling, but it wasn't gloomy either. Even fatigue disappeared somewhere. He was immersed in some kind of thought, or perhaps in memories. Over the years of his life, he had learned to be very reserved, so reserved that many people thought he was always sad. And indeed, a smile on his face was rare.

And so they rode, and it seemed that even a light wind spoke more than these two: it was constantly whispering something and throwing sand and heat. Meanwhile, the sun, having stood at its zenith, began to slide down, gradually weakening the heat. Even when it, completely red, rolled over the horizon, it began to blur, and it seemed that the entire distance that stretched ahead turned into a huge but unusually calm sea. And therefore, at first, none of the travelers paid any attention to the two almost imperceptible dots that shimmered among all this distant sandy surface. But after a while, they became so distinct that it was impossible not to notice them. Still blurred in the hot evening air, they took on more and more distinct outlines, turning from a mirage into something real - into two travelers. They traveled on camels, they did not look like warriors - rather simple wanderers. It was clear from their clothes that the desert was their home.

Approaching them, Asha galloped forward a little faster, taking off the belt thrown over his shoulder as he went, a scabbard with a sword attached to it. Then he demonstratively stretched out his hand with this belt to the side and unclenched his fingers - the belt slipped out of his palm and fell to the ground. Apparently, having understood

and accepted this peculiar gesture of peace, the two strangers drove closer, at a distance of a few steps. Throwing something to the other in a language that Asha did not understand, one of the wanderers moved even closer and suddenly jumped off the camel. Asha silently repeated his action. Then the stranger approached the place where the sword fell, slowly picked it up and put it in Asha's hands. This kind of silent conversation unequivocally determined their mutual trust in each other.

"Who are you?" Asha was the first to ask.

"We are guides in these places. We lead caravans through the desert and earn money from it," the stranger answered.

Asha listened attentively, thought for a moment, weighing each word and assessing the appearance of both riders. Then he glanced at Ajit, just like that, he didn't know why.

"So..." the Indian finally said and hesitated again.

"Quite recently we held a huge Persian punishment here..." the guide said, as if guessing his thought.

When Asha heard this, his eyes seemed to light up, he came a little closer, grabbed the stranger by the hem of his clothes and, without letting him finish the last word, almost shouted:

-Where is... Where did they go?

Ajit, who had been closely following the conversation, fearing that Asha might frighten and even embitter the guide with his intemperance, jumped off his horse and came closer. The stranger silently assessed the whole picture, glanced first at Asha's hand, which was still clutching his robes, looked into his eyes - Asha slowly, as if realizing the strangeness of his behavior, unclenched his fingers and stepped back.

"If you continue walking in the same direction, just to the left of the sunset, you will reach Azad, a glorious Bactrian city. The Persians also went there," the guide answered.

Then he raised his eyebrows slightly and looked inquiringly at the two travelers from India. They, paying almost no attention to him, looked at each other and went to the horses. The guide opened his mouth in surprise, as if about to say something, but his words began to drown in this silent sigh and were finally drowned out by the words of the second stranger, still in the same incomprehensible language, which apparently meant something like:

-Leave! They hardly have anything of value...

Hearing this, he turned sharply, walked over to his camel and saddled it. Then the riders and guides rode past each other in silence, taking one last glance. Two of them, satisfied with their last earnings, were going home, perhaps in search of new caravans or rich travelers. Two more rode after the sun, which was now running away from them. But the sun often hides behind a cloud or behind the

horizon in order to shine even brighter one day. And they chased after him, greedily catching every ray of it, as if fearing that the next second, when they opened their eyelids, the sun would disappear. Now it was everything to them. A distant ghostly dream, it was their best and only guide.

That night, the caravan, weary of the storm, stopped for the night. Everyone happily settled down on the cooling sand. The sky was already full of stars, the moonlight flooded the sand, giving it a whitish color.

The prince, who was no longer too deep in his thoughts, also settled down on the ground near the fire and fell asleep. The thoughts that had tormented him that evening melted away and dissipated into the night. And the Prince slept an absolutely calm and very sound sleep. No dreams or nightmares. The measured crackle of the fire, its warmth and almost perfect silence.

On such a night, it seemed that one could only sleep, especially after such a march and a terrible storm. Only the moon and stars did not sleep - the permanent inhabitants of the night sky. And one man sitting with his head bowed by the fire. With a long stick he stirred the coals, throwing hundreds of red sparks into the air, quickly lost in the moonlight. His eyes, in which tears trembled, from time to time rose to the moon and watched it incessantly. They remembered something, and it made them feel even more sad. Suddenly, with a desperate gesture, he wiped a tear from his eyes and stood up, staring at the moon. He saw nothing but her, but he remembered a lot. He slowly ran his hand over his face, from his chin, pressing hard against his nose, and all the way to his forehead, his fingers sliding through his hair, and through these very fingers he continued to look at the cold white light. And then, lowering his hand, he buried his eyes in the ground and ran his foot across the sand. A trace remained on it - a small depression, along the edges of which grains of sand rolled down and slowly covered it. But the trail could not disappear completely. Neither from the sand, nor from his life. That night remained in his memory forever. He tried to think about it as little as possible, but sometimes, when he was alone with himself and his own thoughts, the memories rolled up to his throat and literally prevented him from breathing. And they had to be released. All events seemed to come alive again: her demanding tone, a burning wound that did not want to heal in any way and made him irritable and even angry.

"I can't go against the law!" You bore me a son, but I cannot make my wife whoever I want! These words burned in his head. He said them that night.

She objected to him, but he turned away and walked away. And then she pounced on him from behind, accidentally catching the wound. Howling in pain, he grabbed his sword and swung back. Without making a sound, she collapsed to the floor, just in time to cast one last uncomprehending glance at him. It was this look that was imprinted in Shahraman's memory forever. The way it turns into a dead emptiness. And how brightly the cursed moon shone on the ill-fated night. Just like this one.

Taking a heavy breath for the last time and no longer feeling strength, Shahraman collapsed to the ground and instantly fell asleep.

By the middle of the next day, Azad appeared before the caravan in all his splendor. It appeared before the eyes of the travelers quite unexpectedly: having climbed another sandy hill, quite high, they saw a majestic city surrounded by a white wall. Thanks to her, Azad stood out sharply against the background of golden sand and was visible from afar. On top of the wall, you could see the tops of houses, pointed towers and, apparently, the palace - the largest and most beautiful building.

It was dangerous to approach the city at once: Rifat had not been warned about the visit of his Persian friend, and therefore the city guards could easily mistake them for enemies - in the caravan there were many warriors in armor and with weapons in their hands. And from a distance it was already visible how the guards began to disperse along the walls of the city, the bows raised were visible, and the readiness to fight back was felt.

Therefore, before reaching the city, the caravan stopped, and two figures separated from the general mass - Shahraman and Tuammak together, without guards, drove up to the city gates:

"Tell Rifat, your sultan, that Shahraman has come to him from a long campaign and brought many gifts!" The Tsar shouted confidently.

Then the two slowly turned around and galloped away towards the caravan. In the meantime, a young soldier was already flying with a report to the Sultan.

"Upon hearing such news, Rifat will immediately open the gate and let us in!" Shahraman said, addressing the Prince when he and Tuammak returned.

The news overtook the Sultan at the moment when he, holding a bunch of grapes in his hands, stood at the edge of the balcony and enjoyed the view of one of his favorite gardens, full of greenery, with a huge fountain in the middle. Hearing this news, he almost dropped

the grapes. His little eyes lit up instantly, and he immediately ordered the gate to be opened, shouting strangely as he did so, making his voice more ridiculous than domineering or frightening. Hearing another order, the young warrior rushed away. And Rifat also ran away from the balcony, somewhere to the palace, leaving the grapes, which, by the way, he loved very much.

After a while, the caravan heard the sounds of the gates opening - the sonorous creaking and clang of massive chains - and everyone, obeying Shahraman's upturned hand, moved towards the city.

From the very gate there was a wide road that led a little upwards and ended right at the palace. Passing by the walls, everyone appreciated their strength and at the same time their beauty. White, sometimes cut with patterns, they were of enormous thickness. On the other side, already inside the city, there were many similar white staircases, wide enough for several people to climb at once.

Along the edges of the great road there were alternately beautiful rich houses, small groves, or simply separate, sparsely planted palm trees and small shrubs. The city guards instantly lost all their hostility and now simply escorted the caravan. Someone looked at the huge hourglass with surprise - none of them had seen anything like it before, someone's attention was attracted by birds and other animals in cages, and someone almost indifferently walked nearby, as if the arrival of such caravans was a completely ordinary thing for them.

Almost the entire army of Rifat was now in Azad - he was ready to send it against Persia if only the signal came. But the special camp was located in another part of the city, and none of the Persians would have seen this army with all their desire, and therefore would not have suspected anything. Rifath liked this outcome even more. He was afraid of India, but since Shahraman was victorious again, he would not have to do anything at all. And if he asked anything, Rifat would simply lie, saying that his army was still guarding the borders and that he could do little to help Shahraman, holding back the enemies almost at the walls of Azad.

The sun hung at its zenith and scorched incredibly hot, but still there was a coolness in the city, slightly restraining the fierce heat. Part of the reason for this was the coolness emanating from the stone of the buildings and the road, which had cooled down overnight; the shadow cast by the palm trees protected the eyes from the bright rays; A light wind, blowing as if from a river or from the ground, smelling of dampness, pleasantly cooled the skin, covered with small drops of sweat.

Gradually, a majestic palace opened up to the eye. Huge, built of white stone with golden inclusions, it struck the imagination. The

road approached its most important and largest building. But around the palace were planted many pointed towers, some very close, and others a little farther away, but all of them were connected by numerous passages, wide walls overgrown here and there with greenery and drowning in huge palm groves. Thanks to the palace, the whole city was strikingly different from the desert landscapes to which the travelers had already become accustomed during these long days - everywhere you could see greenery, you could feel life, the water here was not something extremely unusual - it was in many places: - in fountains, in small ponds. It seemed that the desert ended in this city and a huge tropical forest began, breathing life and not stingy with life-giving moisture. And even the sand that lined the stone road to the palace was somehow different. The same golden color, and at the same time something elusive. It was a little damp, it also breathed coolness, and it was not so crumbly.

As the caravan approached the palace, the Prince examined the large doors that led inside. They were almost three times the height of a man, and now both doors were open to meet the guests and as if inviting them to come in as soon as possible. Rifath came out to meet the Persian caravan and, stopping on the upper steps, cried out in his shrill voice:

"Shahraman!" What a surprise!

Then, instantly, he began to scour the entire caravan for anything interesting and unusual. And almost immediately, his gaze froze as if riveted on the large silhouette of an hourglass, hidden from view by a cloak. His eyes were filled with sparkling, childishly naïve delight. Rifath, who loved such things, was extremely curious and almost forgot about reality for a few seconds, after which he stretched out his hand, pointing towards the clock, which was covered with a huge cloth, and asked:

-What's it?

And with the same eyes full of delight, he turned his gaze to the Persian king. He smiled and said:

"Wait until evening." We should all rest after the journey. And after that, you'll see everything! Where can we stay?

"Yes," the Sultan said a little disappointed. "Oh yes, of course, to rest... I will help you and your subjects to set up a palace, and all the soldiers will be able to spend the night in the soldiers' barracks!"

"That's great!" Shahraman said resolutely and with a smile, dispelling Rifath's doubtful and disappointed mood.

He, apparently in anticipation, greedily rubbed his hands and gestured for the king to follow him, at the same time calling one of the guards to him.

"Take our guests to the barracks, give each of them a place to sleep and a hearty dinner," Rifath threw Rifath to the latter quickly but

loudly enough for Shahraman and a few others to hear him, and retreated into the shadow of the palace walls, calling the king, the Prince, and the people close to them to follow him.

The prince felt that he wanted to relax completely before resting. While his father, Tuammak and a few other special people went to bed to relieve fatigue, the Prince went out into the enclosed courtyard, threw off his clothes and dived into the small pool. The water tingled the skin with a pleasant coolness, and the movements became much easier. The prince looked at his reflection flickering in the ripples of the water, looking for the wounds he had sustained in his first battle. They were his real pride. After all, he was not hiding behind the backs of the soldiers, he himself was in the thick of the battle. And if someone asked him to tell about it, he would tell everything in the smallest detail with undisguised pleasure.

After swimming, he got out of the water and decided to follow the example of the others and take a nap. The fatigue still felt in his body helped the Prince fall asleep very quickly.

He had a strange dream. In it, he stood on a huge mirror, on which small ripples ran in the same way as on water, but for some reason he did not fall under the water. Looking down at his feet, he saw his reflection. There was darkness around and above his head, but he could see himself clearly. Not understanding where he was, the Prince decided to go ahead. But immediately he felt that he could not take a step. Something was holding him. He tried to move his hand. In vain, the same result. But he felt that there were no shackles, chains, or ropes on his hands. He is completely free, but still as if in captivity.

And suddenly he took a step. But not of his own free will. This step was made by his reflection in the mirror. Then the Prince saw it tilt its head and look at itself. Then he takes another step. No matter how hard the Prince tried, he could not do anything on his own. He was entirely dependent on reflection. It decided where to go, what part of the body to move. And what frightened the Prince most of all was that even his own thoughts depended on the Prince on the other side of the mirror. He tried to pull them in one direction, but the reflection directed his thoughts in another direction, so the Prince had difficulty understanding what was happening to him. Did he really end up in such a strange prison? Is he not him, but his own reflection, devoid of will and his own thoughts?

After another step, the Prince finally felt that he could move on his own, and immediately fell under the water. But he did not want it. He was just drawn there. The reflection absorbed it. Looking up, he

saw him again. But this time, the reflection listened to him. It repeated his movement and thoughts. But can reflection have thoughts? Having been on the other side, the Prince had no doubt about it. But this did not restore order to his own thoughts. And he did not understand which side of reality was. And did it exist at all...

Only a fine line seemed real. Maybe it was worth holding on to it? Not to drown and not to die in captivity, but to hold on to a fragile edge, a delicate balance? But will this infinitely thin line be able to accommodate it? What if he had to become a part of it himself? Captivity again? Then where is freedom? Does it exist? Or did it at least exist? And he deprives himself of it? By the fact that it is simply here. But where else can he be, if all three sides reject him, bring inexplicable fear into his soul? And there was no way. And there was no one to point him out. And the Prince could not take a step again. He saw only one way to deal with everything, and that was to destroy everything. And as soon as he thought about it, cracks ran across the surface of the water, after which the edge crumbled, and in each fragment he saw himself. He stood alone, in absolute emptiness, alone with himself and with his victory.

When the Prince woke up, he still remembered what he had seen in his dream. He left some unpleasant feeling, reminiscent of doom and inevitability. Trying to get rid of him, the Prince scoffed at the idea that a person could somehow depend on his reflection. After all, a person is real, and everything else - his shadow and his reflection - depends on himself. Where he goes, they will come, and at the same second. No objections or delays.

But only as long as they need it.

Just as quickly, like a shadow running after a person, the long-awaited evening came. Rifat sat busily on his throne and burned with impatience. He knew that this time Shahraman had special gifts, and he couldn't wait to receive them.

Finally, the doors opened and Shahraman himself entered, and next to him several people, including the Prince and the vizier.

"Greetings again, my friend!" said the Persian king and bowed slightly. "I've brought you wonderful expensive gifts!" It's time to take a look at them!

-At last! I am ready! Rifat said and jumped up from his throne, which he did very rarely. So he really couldn't wait another second.

Persian soldiers entered the hall. Some of them carried skeins of excellent fabric embroidered with precious stones. Someone was carrying cages with birds. Rifat eagerly followed each new soldier who passed through the doors.

"These birds will be a great addition to your menagerie!" Shahraman said.

Then several prisoners were brought into the hall, among whom was the princess and several other girls. Their hands were not tied, but no one was trying to escape—that would be foolish. Among the prisoners were several tall men with misty eyes. The reason for this was the doom they felt.

Huge clocks were brought in last. Seeing them, Rifat instantly forgot about the rest of the gifts and asked:

–What is this?

About two dozen soldiers carried watches. It was clear from their faces that it was very difficult for them. When they reached the middle of the hall, they carefully lowered the watch to the floor, then five of them took thick ropes and began to lift them from one end, while the others moved the watch so that it gradually stood upright.

When the cloth that hid it from view was pulled off the watch, Shahraman said with special pride in his voice:

"I give you the Sand of Time!"

The hall was filled with a golden glow. It came from the watch itself, inside of which there was something. The glow pulsed and attracted the attention of everyone in the hall.

Rifat ran to his watch and placed both hands on the glass. His delight knew no bounds, his palms were even sweating with excitement.

"What can he do?" What is it for? He said, not taking his eyes off the mysterious glow.

"Let me tell you about this Clock," the vizier interjected, not allowing Shahraman to interject the words. "The sands hold the greatest treasure that man can get. But if you just look at them, they are useless. You need to open them to find out what they are. Even eternal life is a miserable trifle compared to what they can give.

Shahraman listened with interest and felt that he was beginning to regret that he was giving such a treasure as a gift. Rifat had forgotten about everything in the world.

"Tell me, how do they open?" I want to see all these treasures! Are they more expensive than gold?

"They are more precious than all the gold in the world, Sultan! The vizier answered.

The prince looked at the Clock in surprise, but thought of something else. He didn't understand how just one beautiful thing could be more valuable than all the other treasures? Is she really as special and exceptional as Amar said?

"I'll help you see the Sands." To do this, I only need a dagger, but it is in the hands of a man who is much more powerful than me, and it is up to him to decide how to use it," the vizier continued with

a slight grin. After finishing his words, he turned to the Prince and said, "My Prince, will you help us?"

The vizier hesitantly stepped forward, feeling intoxicated at the opportunity to be the first to touch the Sands, which the vizier had so promisingly praised. From this his feet themselves led to the Clock.

Catching up with the vizier, he looked at him inquiringly. He pointed to a slit in the neck of the Clock and, with the softest smile he was capable of, said:

"Insert the dagger here, and the Clock will be opened."

The prince turned to the Clock, took out a dagger from his belt and slowly began to bring the blade closer to the cherished goal. The tip of the dagger flashed with a blue light, and it seemed to the Prince that all other light, except for that coming from the dagger and the Clock, had gone out. And all the people disappeared. He was the only one left. And he opened the Hours and was the first to taste the mystery. He looked at them and thought that he had to open them. Now the Prince was also strongly attracted by this wonderful brilliance inside the Clock, he admired it. To let this power unfold, stand tall and show yourself and your great secrets. He already imagined that they carried unspeakable glory, he felt proud of his primacy. It was even better than just earning them in battle. At the last moment, when it still depended on him whether the dagger would reach the target or not, his blue eyes suddenly flashed yellow. Anyone who looked closely would have decided that it was a reflection of the Sand. Perhaps it was so.

To the right of the Prince, behind the soldiers, stood a girl in a red dress. Seeing what was happening, she whispered:

-No... No!

When the Prince was about to finish what he had started, she went from whispering to shouting and rushed forward, desperately hoping to break through the line of Persian soldiers. But they caught her by the hands and did not allow her to go further. The prince turned, and she saw his yellow eyes. She realized that it was too late to change anything.

As he brought the dagger to its end, he heard a soft click, after which the bottom of the Clock opened, and clouds of a strange golden mist saturated with Sand immediately crept out of it. At the same time, the walls shook and anxious voices were heard. And the Prince felt that his heart seemed to be torn in two. No pain. That's why he wasn't frightened right away. It's just that the blood began to flow through the body in a different way. Just emptiness inside. And emptiness outside. And he himself is emptiness.

The fog slowly crept across the floor and touched the people. At first, he did not rise above their feet. But then, having reached the sultan, it began to grow.

Rifat shrieked in fright.

-What is this? Get it away from me! Guard!

But the guards were already busy brushing the fog away from them. However, their attempts were pathetic and futile. Sand was spreading everywhere and enveloping everything. The Prince, who was standing at the Clock, felt his legs go numb and staggered backwards.

Suddenly, a stone fell next to him. Quite large and heavy. He could easily kill the Prince. After that, the first screams were heard. The prince saw people clutching their heads, running away in panic and... turn into monsters. Right in front of my eyes. His skin dried out, his clothes were torn, his arms and legs stretched out, taking on ugly shapes, and his human features disappeared, as if time had aged them in a few seconds. And everyone resisted as best they could. Someone tried to drive away the incomprehensible fog with their hands. Someone was tearing their clothes and scratching at their chests, as if trying to get inside under the bones and take out the Sand.

The walls began to shake more violently, and in the next second, there was a crack from above and huge boulders flew down, which in an instant cut short people's lives. A huge hole formed in the ceiling, just above the Clock, and the night sky appeared, but for some reason there were no stars on it. Instead, flashes of lightning were visible, which grew into one gigantic flash, giving rise to a pillar of light that struck the Clock. Immediately after that, the Sands began to behave really aggressively. The people's screams became even more desperate. It was no longer they who were screaming, but their souls, tormented by a terrible and mysterious element.

The sand, as if in a storm, crept into his eyes, ears and throat. Inhaling once by accident, the Prince felt something cut him from the inside and, succumbing to everyone's panic, rushed to the exit. Even now he felt that the Sand was pressing on his consciousness, breaking his connection with reality. At that moment, he thought only of himself and even forgot that his father was standing somewhere nearby. Passing the doors, he chose a corridor at random and ran along it, vaguely hearing the screams of people and the cracking of breaking walls and vaults.

"What happened?" was the main question that swirled in his head.

But for the time being, his question was only about what was happening around him, not inside him.

Chapter 10. Yellow

Now he was running away. Somewhere. At least somewhere, but just to get away. Away from the nightmare that seemed to follow him on his heels, and sometimes almost preceded him, teasing and mocking him. Fear, screams, people... And not people. Horror, wild horror tore apart reality, filling the resulting voids with something new, but unimaginably terrible, not even frightening, but killing, tearing to shreds. And the main thing is the hellish cold, penetrating to the very depths, deeper than the strongest wind; a cold that tears at the soul, exposing it to the whole world, which seems to gladly rush at it and tear it to pieces as the most cruel beast does not tear its prey. Consciousness, capable of perceiving reality, has lost its sense of reality. The prince did not fall into unconsciousness, he was responsible for his every step, but what was happening lost the shade of reality. With a wild grinding sound, blocks of stone broke off from the walls and vaults of the palace, crashing on the floor and bringing even more chaos to the atmosphere, which already reigned everywhere.

The prince, who was running along the wide corridor, felt the walls begin to press on his consciousness, they seemed to move, trying to crush him, the corridor stretched, turning into an endless road. The road by which he ran from his horror. The next turn seemed to be something unreal, something that had left this world along with the calm.

A figure flashed in front of the Prince. Another. People. A lot of people. A whole crowd was running behind him, next to him, ahead of him. And then the crowd melted away, crumbled into the Sand. And now he is already running alone. Everywhere there is an ominous shine. Something dark. Fear. Malice. Yes, it is anger. She poured into the Prince, filled him, moved him, at the same time weighing down each step, but giving him confidence. He felt... More naturally, anger, anger and all the horror that hovered around gave him strength, helped him in every movement.

And again fear. All previous feelings and thoughts flew off him, as if someone had brushed them off him like a layer of dust. Reality continued to darken, fade away, leave the Prince - now he was literally running by touch, vaguely remembering the direction, desperately trying to keep it, he ran even faster. A jump, a second of flight, and again running. How did he jump without seeing anything in front of him? He didn't know himself. Apparently, he felt a hundred times more confident in the dark, he did not need any ordinary human feelings.

The darkness dissipated in one second or even faster. And this frightened the Prince, a hundred small lights pierced his light of the

returned reality, struck him with its diversity, brightness, a pinching feeling appeared in his heart, tears welled up in his eyes. With a casual movement, the Prince brushed them away and rushed further down the corridor with double eagerness. And again the feeling of fading reality. He felt himself running, but he could not control his movements and could hardly understand the road. And then his legs ceased to obey him completely, his mind floated away, he was drawn to the left wall, and he, still without losing speed, crashed into it. Another step and with the same shoulder the Prince ran into a column that half protruded from the wall. Unable to withstand this blow, he fell to the floor, miraculously managing to put out his hands, thereby somehow softening the blow. All this instantly brought him back to reality, he abruptly opened his eyes much wider than usual, mortal horror could be read on his face, shivering all over his body, pain in his shoulder began to consume him, increasing fear and despair. The prince quickly got to his feet as fast as he could, trying to lean his left hand against the wall, which caused it to burst into even more pain. After that, he turned around slightly, just rested his back against the wall, grabbed his sore shoulder with his right hand and looked back with the same horror. At first glance, it might seem that the corridor was completely empty, but this thought was deceptive - everything was swallowed up by the approaching Sands. Like an avalanche, they moved, destroying everything in their path, absorbing and taking over the whole world, penetrating even where an ordinary avalanche would not have a place. The sands penetrated through the consciousness of man, climbed into his soul, released that which had long been dormant in him and waiting to be awakened, all his secret desires in their true or even exaggerated form, clothed in reason and obscuring the light of the heart.

The prince made a jerk that echoed in his shoulder with another burst of pain, pushed off the wall, but did not rush to run further. Perhaps because he did not feel the strength, or maybe because he felt the inevitability of everything that was happening, soaked in despair and the Sands. In the next second, an icy wave washed over him. A terrible, soul-burning cold, trying to tear it into many pieces and scatter them away from each other. There was something beautiful in this sight in its own way. The sands moved swiftly and gracefully, like a thought hovering over a vast, unbelievably large river, capturing shreds of reality just as they were now capturing every bit of the Prince. All this took a few seconds, but it seemed that in those moments time almost stopped, stretching out the pleasure of capturing another soul, which, like prey, could no longer escape from the tenacious predatory clutches.

Then all reality became intermittent for the Prince: he remembered another figure flashing past him, then how his legs

buckled, and he plopped down on the floor again, a small stone fell next to him, the impact of which on the floor echoed along the corridor in both directions. To the prince, the sound was different, he heard the sound of breaking glass, the sound of many shards. Then the feeling of unusually silence, only once broken by a distant, seemingly feminine, scream. A fit of rage that made him clench his fists so that his fingers cracked, a wave of breaking pain swept through his hands, which instantly released him as soon as he loosened his grip. Then a jerk, and he stands on his feet again, now much more confident and firmer; Without thinking about anything, he jerked both hands sharply to the sides. A crunch was heard in his left shoulder, another flash of pain, which immediately faded away - apparently, the bone took its place, and the hand began to obey again.

The first thing the Prince wanted was to destroy everything that was happening now. To destroy this unnatural reality, to kill it, to strike it with a sword in the same way as another enemy in a fight. His hand involuntarily rushed to the scabbard, but pulled out not a sword, but an ill-fated dagger. Without even noticing it, he struck the cloud of Sand, gripping the hilt unusually tightly, as if afraid that the Sands would take away his last chance to escape. At that moment, the dagger lit up with a strong blue glow, and the Prince's hand sank into the yellow light emanating from the hilt. The dagger seemed to take a breath, the kind he had been waiting for hundreds of years, ignited with a new life, and showered the Prince with another wave of cold, which instantly swept through his body, knocking him off his feet.

Now he walked much more slowly, did not run, did not rush away, stopped feeling that horror and despair, reality did not fade away, now he saw more clearly than ever before. Not even a small pebble escaped his attention, which rolled away with a quiet rustle when the Prince touched it with his foot. And he was aware of everything now just as clearly. Or rather, he thought that he was aware of it, until the real essence of reality fell on him in another wave of pain that enveloped him from head to toe. He stopped. Terror returned to him, but not as before. The horror of the past came over him, he remembered the first seconds of his mistake, the first wave of cold, which he felt, apparently, before anyone else, all those grimaces of pain that were reflected on people's faces - perhaps the last thing they experienced when they left this world. The sands swallowed everyone, knocking out sheaves of golden sparks, crumbling their souls into powder, throwing people to the floor, knocking them down and taking out something terrible, extinguishing the sparkle in their eyes and filling it with a new unnatural yellow light that filled their hearts with even greater terror.

Again the rustle of a rolling stone. Acquaintance. Terribly familiar. The prince looked at his hand, the dagger.

A little further away, the corridor curved, leading into the unknown. The prince, who had not expected what he had seen, gave a low cry and dropped his blade, staggering back. And he almost fell - there was no wall behind him: it was in this place that it collapsed from the very ceiling, and several large shapeless blocks lay inside the large hall that opened up to the view. Barely on his feet, the Prince turned and looked at the hall - it was much higher than the corridor in which he was still standing, much better lit and much more luxuriously decorated. Two huge balconies stretched along both walls, supported by massive carved columns of white stone, sometimes covered with gold. The prince took a few steps, jumping lightly on one of the shards of the wall. Huge sheets of fabric hung along the walls, decorated with some kind of symbol closer to the upper edge. The balconies, which began at the same wall, but only a little farther away, stretched to the opposite wall. Most of it was occupied by a window of astonishing size, through which, even from this distance, the night was oozing, mingled with the light of the full moon, which seemed to echo the golden light of the Sands scattered throughout the hall. The prince, hearing a strange rustle, turned back, staring into the darkness of the corridor. And she immediately responded to the call of his gaze, throwing a bluish, painfully familiar glint at him. Jumping back, he bent down and stretched out his hand to the dagger, this time feeling what was coming from it... warmly, as if the dagger itself was reaching for him. And a moment later, as his fingers closed on the hilt again, he heard someone shouting behind him and the sound of footsteps. He turned. Several pairs of yellow eyes stood out from the entire hall as if they were the only thing emitting light. A Bactrian soldier, with normal but terribly frightened eyes, was running away from these monsters, who had once been glorious Persian warriors, as could be seen from the remnants of their ammunition. But, frightened, he ran without thinking about anything, blindly trusting his instincts, feelings and succumbing to his despair, literally lost in it. And so, turning back and thus making an unforgivable mistake, the soldier ran into another pair of eyes - the last thing he saw in his life. It seemed that they could kill only by their appearance, by their cold, frightening shine. But the owner of those eyes had a more effective weapon - an impeccably sharpened saber entered the young warrior's chest, piercing his heart, in an instant depriving him of the chance for salvation, which, mixed with despair, seemed to be the only thing that forced him to flee. Running into the edge, he made another uncertain movement forward, as if continuing to run, thereby piercing his heart even deeper.

With a rough movement, the sand monster - it looked like a human, but it was not, it was a monster and nothing else - threw the unfortunate victim from its blade, causing a few drops of blood to splash on its clothes and sprinkle the floor.

Terror tore at the Prince's throat. He wanted to scream, to let out this horror, but he held on tightly inside and did not want to get out, continued to torment him, which made the Prince dizzy for a moment and he took a few noisy and uncertain steps forward. It was the first time that death had caused him such a strong feeling of disgust.

The terrible yellow lights turned towards him, as if on command, hearing this mute cry and loud tread. Those same eyes, if they could be called that at all, there were no glimpses of soul in them, only a naked, cold mind that corroded everything around them, mercilessly crushing and shattering into pieces, instilling endless fear and literally tearing the heart out of his chest, snatched the Prince's consciousness from the clutches of oblivion, instantly brought him back to reality and threw him forward, towards those who had only recently been people.

Now he felt the excitement he knew again, the thrill of battle. But this time it was diluted with something new, made him feel different: he wanted not to kill, he wanted revenge. The prince didn't even know who this warrior was, he had never seen his face before, but it didn't matter at all. He was going to avenge the cold-bloodedness with which this murder was committed - senseless, ridiculous, cruel. It seemed that even the very thought of him breathed coldness. A new feeling, still almost unknown to the Prince. Or just a long-forgotten one. He did not notice it, but it did not cease to exist, it did not obey reason, but only lurked in the corner of his soul, only to emerge one day and light the way in the cold darkness.

Confidently jumping from block to block, jumping stone after stone, not losing confidence for a second and tightly gripping the hilts of his sword and dagger in his hands, he ran towards the battle. He was not even afraid of the height and number of his enemies - there were six or seven of them, and even the smallest of them was two heads taller than the Prince. Each of the monsters was wider in the shoulders, incredible strength was felt even in the eyes, and, strangest of all, their bodies not only preserved, but also increased their dexterity. Their predatory eyes also wanted this battle, looked forward to it, seemed to revel in it and the Prince's growing anger, which permeated him so much that it began to ooze out, turning into a wild scream full of disgust, piercing and cutting the ears.

After running through most of the hall, he finally got closer to his goal. Just in time, he saw another medium-sized boulder that rolled farther than the others from the collapsed wall, stepped on it,

and, pushing off with all his strength, prepared to deliver the first blow.

And he did. Immediately and without delay. The sword plunged into the first of the sand warriors, of medium height, slicing through his chest and emitting bright rays like blood splatters; You could even feel them, but they didn't make the sword redder, and there was no unpleasant feeling of something sticky on your hands. But not everything went so smoothly, not everything went as the Prince was used to it: a huge gaping wound that opened on the monster's body did not kill him. It retained all its strength and, not even paying attention to what had happened, rushed at the Prince, unleashing massive and sonorous blows of the huge sword one after another.

But the enraged and wild Prince was not afraid. Even though everything was going completely wrong, he had no intention of backing down. Holding out his sword in front of him, shielding himself from the blows, he watched the rest of his opponents and at the same time thought about his next moves. His goal was, taking advantage of the fact that the rest of the sand monsters were still indifferent, to push his first opponent a little to the side, so that he could catch a few saving moments on occasion and try, having destroyed the first, to be fully armed to meet the others. Dodging another heavy blow, the Prince kicked his enemy in the stomach with all his might, thereby throwing him back and seizing the initiative, rushed after him, preparing to unleash a flurry of merciless blows on him, not just killing, but literally destroying him. The monster, who had not expected a blow of such force, flew back, desperately waving its arms and falling on its back. A heavy blow of his body was heard on the floor. Rolling awkwardly, he tried to get up, and at the same moment he met the same wave of blows from the Prince. Filled with cruelty, they fell on him one after another, piercing his armor, slicing through his arms, shoulders, chest, face. Sheaves of yellow blinding sparks, as if in agony, burst out of it, filled with invisible pain, and looked like the cry of a dying man. The Prince's attention was focused as never before, every movement was precise and strong, cruel and deadly. The enemy, already crumbling to dust, having lost his arm, tried to stand up, leaning on his sword. And one more rough movement – the Prince, without even thinking, knocked this support out of his hand, causing the sword to fly a decent distance, clanging sonorously on the floor. In the next movement, pressing his left hand that held the dagger to his right, he gripped the sword even tighter and, putting all his strength and the strength that the presence of the dagger gave him, he struck off the head of his opponent. A pillar of yellow light shot out of the monster's headless neck like a scream, illuminating everything around it with an even brighter light, and then began to fade away. Apparently, even by inertia, the Prince

mercilessly kicked the monster in the chest, throwing it even further away from him. The body flew away a few steps and, barely touching the floor, melted in the next instant, merging with the Sand that swarmed around. The enemy was not killed, he was simply destroyed, cut into pieces and fed to death.

But it was too early to stop - this small victory meant almost nothing. Even the biggest victory means nothing if it is frozen one step away from the real one. While still striking with his sword, the Prince heard out of the corner of his ear several monsters rush towards him from behind. Anticipating what was going to happen in the next second, he swung his left hand tighter than usual with a sharp and strong movement, swinging to where a second ago there was emptiness and where the dagger now struck another enemy. Feeling the dagger enter him, the Prince was about to turn around completely and deliver a crushing blow with his sword, but suddenly he felt his hand pass through the sandy flesh, saw the dagger burst into flames, as if satiating the disappearing, melting body of the victim. Not quite ready for such a turn, the Prince almost fell on his back, but in time he put out the hand that clutched the dagger, opened his palm and, leaning on the floor, managed to deliver the very sword blow that he had originally planned. And, perhaps, with even greater force, because having hit one of the tallest opponents, he made him literally fly back and fall to the floor, and as he fell, he knocked another one to the ground. Continuing this inconceivable dance of death, whirling like a whirlwind, the Prince, using the inertia provided by the heavy sword in his right hand, managed to stand up, again clutching the left dagger and tearing it off the marble, and, making another half turn, maintaining balance on only his right leg, struck a direct blow with the dagger to the chest of the next opponent who had just jumped. And here it was again: it melted, dissolved in the Sand enveloping everything in icy horror, but this time it lingered in reality a little longer after the blow, so that the Prince's hand did not fall through it so instantly and he did not lose his balance.

In the next moment, calculating every move, the Prince rushed at the two who were still lying awkwardly on the floor, one on top of the other. With a deliberate movement, raising both blades above his head at once, he pushed off the same massive stone that lay nearby, flew above the victims and, with particular cruelty in his gaze, unleashed a double blow of unimaginable force, piercing the two bodies at once, feeling how one by one they succumbed to the incredible new power of the dagger, the perfect edge of the sword that pierced the chest of the first and the shoulder of the second. The bodies, one by one, disappeared, causing the dagger to burn with an even brighter light - these flashes were stronger than all the previous

ones; the dagger seemed to be satiated, but it still craved the Sand. For a dagger, it was like blood, necessary like air to a man, the blade was saturated and breathed with it, and after each flash, a couple of seconds passed, and a flash of yellow light echoed it, but it came from the hilt, flooding the palm and the slits between the fingers with a golden shimmer.

At the very moment when the Prince struck this blow, he felt a blow whizz over his head, so strong that even the vibrations of the air caused by it caused the young man to sway, but he had expected this blow - it landed just above his head, but it never reached the target. After destroying two more sand opponents, the Prince instantly switched to the next one - the one whose blow whistled over him a second ago. Without hesitation, and using his position - now he was sitting in front of another enemy - the Prince, absorbing all the anger and rage that he had already managed to pour out on his enemies, clenched his sword and struck the monster in the legs. There was a crack, flashes of yellow light, and the clang of a dropped sword. With this incredible blow, the Prince deprived his opponent of both legs, and now he had no choice but to fall directly on the Prince's left arm, which was outstretched up. A moment's heaviness, and again the body dissolved, floated away with the Sand, and illuminated the dagger with a new flash of blue and then yellow light.

The last enemy turned out to be the largest. And apparently the strongest, the best of warriors. He didn't even consider it necessary to intervene in the battle while the Prince dealt with the rest of the monsters one by one.

Raising his huge sword at the ready, he threw a look of his yellow eyes at the Prince, filled with cold, horror and... Mind. Something incredibly reasonable, imbued with consciousness, peeked through these two fires. At another moment, this look would even frighten the Prince, but now, inflamed by the excitement of battle, a sense of movement and reveling in revenge, he thoughtlessly rushed at the next, as it seemed to him, victim.

After taking a few incredibly fast steps, the Prince jumped to a new target, trying to hit him in the chest. Being almost one and a half times taller than him, the monster was a much bigger problem than all the others, so the blows had to be even faster and hit the most vulnerable places. The Prince was saved by the fact that, in addition to the dagger, he also put his sword in front of him, which bore the main force of the blow. The monster, as if reading the Prince's thoughts and anticipating the Prince's intentions, met him with a powerful blow that threw the Prince with incredible force, throwing him onto a stone. Hitting his head, the Prince almost lost consciousness and, looking at his opponent, felt fear and a sense of

helplessness. The enemy towered over him as something unattainable.

The dagger was lying on the floor a few steps away from him, and he could not reach, the sword had broken into several pieces and could not help the Prince either. In addition, he was exhausted from this fall, apparently in shock; He could barely control himself, balancing on the edge of the abyss, at the bottom of which the waters of death were splashing.

The monster retained human features - the eyes of an unnatural color were set in the same place as an ordinary person; The face continued to express some emotions or feelings, but they were weaker compared to human ones and could hardly see through the strange light of the eyes. The prince noticed a mop of gray hair sticking awkwardly from under his helmet. There was something painfully familiar in all this, barely discernible, hardly recognizable, but this feeling of something familiar immediately stuck to the Prince and did not leave him, distracting him from the mortal horror that was creeping through him, making him literally shiver from the hellish cold. Monster... no, brow... the sand warrior rushed at the Prince, raising his sword high above his head. So he jumped, wanting to plunge the blade into the Prince as deep as possible, enough to crumble the marble floor under the Prince with the force of the blow. My heart was beating wildly, the last seconds were flowing away. The prince hoped to jump to the side at the last moment and confuse his opponent. A barely perceptible flash, and... The warrior stopped in mid-air, nearly collapsing to the floor. An arrow small in comparison with him protruded from his throat, flying out of nowhere and saving the Prince. The monster staggered back a few steps, clearing the way for the dagger. The prince, gathering the remnants of his strength, rushed forward, reunited with the dagger and rushed at ... his father. He already understood this, but did not fully realize it. From the fact that his father was carried back, he was bent in the same direction, and one of his knees was put forward. A slight leap, then the Prince pushed off that knee and struck the enemy in the face. A cruel blow, inhuman, disgusting. And then the realization fell on the Prince of what was so familiar in these rough features. It was his own father, a warrior at his core, strong, relentless, and ruthless, especially in his youth. Even the dagger couldn't deal with it in an instant, and the Prince felt that even after the blow, he could still feel this flesh, and it didn't seem like it was going to crumble like that. His father fell heavily on his back, and with him the Prince, causing the dagger, still in the neck of his opponent, to go deeper into the floor, so that a dull thud was heard on the marble floor. And only after that did the Sands absorb this body. A moment later, the dagger lit up with a particularly strong flash of blue, full of sparks, mixing with the flash

of yellow light that echoed it. Then they repeated again, one after another, even brighter, stronger enough that even the Prince's eyes seemed to flash first blue and then yellow. And only then, when the Prince felt the cold floor with his hands, the glow began to fade, turning into a faint, almost imperceptible flicker. And just as sharply as he felt the cold of the stone floor, intensified a hundredfold by the cold horror emanating from the Sands, the realization of what had happened collapsed on him again.

Hellish pain squeezed his consciousness. Pain mixed with the Sands, turned from an ordinary feeling into inhuman torture, shook the Prince. His heart, soaked in this poison, beat so fast and hard that it seemed to the Prince that it was about to fly out of his chest - his ribs were literally cracking, each beat of his heart was echoed by a throbbing pain in his head. The most terrible thing about this pain was that it repressed, even forcefully squeezed out all the feelings from the Prince, leaving him alone with his consciousness, and each new thought unbearably painfully whipped at him, leaving deep wounds, but did not allow him to leave reality and sink into oblivion even for a second. Poisonous tears rolled down his cheeks, fell down, flew through the Sand, already filled with it, and slammed sonorously on the floor. This sound echoed in his head in an even more terrible hum, although in reality he simply could not hear it. The pain of loss tore him apart, hardened him to the limit, squeezing out the last of his strength along with anger.

The prince did not know how long he sat like this, on his knees, cursing Peski, the vizier, the dagger... Glancing at the blade and feeling another rush of savage rage, he threw it away from him with incredible disgust. The sound with which he fell echoed through the hall.

And then he felt as if the tears had ended. And the pain did not let go, but now it no longer pressed, but on the contrary, strengthened and moved on. Resting his hand on the floor, he first stood on his left leg, and then straightened to his full height, fully meeting a new world, a world full of cruelty and pain. But now he was so accustomed to it that it seemed that nothing would make him feel it. And he inhaled the coolness of the Sands, slowly, deeply, as if delaying the moment of exhalation, a strange smile appeared on his face, and golden sparks flashed in his eyes for a second.

He looked around. He examined himself: his knees were stained with dust and sand. Leaning slightly, he shook them off with careless movements, and then his eyes fell on the dagger. He had ceased to have that incredible feeling of disgust for him, and in the end he had lost his sword, and the dagger was the only weapon available to him now. He took a few steps towards the ill-fated blade, but suddenly an extraordinary sight caught his eye. He had seen his father's sword,

but now it was much smaller than the immensely large blade that had managed to literally shatter his own sword into splinters in one mighty blow. Now he saw it, and his memories of when this sword was incomparably larger involuntarily surfaced in front of him. He remembered so strongly that his memories turned into reality, mixing with the one that surrounded him now. Two realities were superimposed on each other, turning into a single whole. For a second, it seemed to him that Time itself parted before the power of his consciousness, revealing its innermost secrets. This was the extraordinariness of the spectacle. Two realities, a great mystery. All barriers collapsed, and all kinds of boundaries were erased.

And then one small detail made the Prince tear himself away from the incredible picture drawn partly by his imagination, partly by the Sands and partly by Time. A small blue flash a little further away from the Prince. Dagger. This time he did not emit that violent glow. Or rather, it was not visible, only small sparks ran along its edge. But the Prince felt this light of incredible power, capable of literally knocking you off your feet and attracting and beckoning at the same time. Another second, and here he is again gripping this hilt, and a familiar chill runs through his skin, inflaming his mind and muffling the frenzied beats of his heart.

The prince took his father's sword in his hand and immediately felt that he had become related to him. They seemed to be made for each other: having shrunk in size, he fit perfectly into the hand, which in the very first moments ran warmth, stopping somewhere in the shoulder.

After walking a few steps, still enjoying the reunion with the dagger, the Prince began to slowly replay the recent events, everything that had happened during the fight with his father and everything that had happened immediately after it. At first, he heard only fragments of those events, fragments from which nothing could be understood. But the dagger came to the rescue - as soon as the Prince focused a little more on any, even the most insignificant detail, it immediately acquired a hundred new ones, each of which, in turn, dug into the Prince's mind with another hundred new details, reproducing the whole picture of those minutes in front of him. And then one trifle slipped before him, followed by nothing - apparently something new and unfamiliar to either the Prince or the dagger. Somewhere above, on the balcony, to the right of the hole in the wall, something red flashed, quickly and almost imperceptibly, escaping even the memory of the dagger. Loosening his grip and letting go of the entire picture painted in front of him, his thoughts were instantly transported back to this world, and his gaze fell towards the large arch leading to the next hall. And then the Prince heard strange sounds that resembled someone's voice. But not the voice of man...

In the darkness of the night, the silhouette of something huge and majestic loomed. Illuminated by the sparse golden light of the stars and the moon, the majestic city slowly opened up to the eye. The travelers had not the slightest doubt that it was Azad. Like a giant desert guardian, he slowly floated out of the darkness, breaking the familiar picture of this endless sandy ocean.

Asha, as soon as he saw the city, increased his speed, but Ajit shouted to him:

-Wait! If you are noticed, everything is lost!

And Asha instantly realized his mistake. And indeed, why did he not understand such an obvious trifle himself? A young warrior with boiling blood, he was always the first to rush when faced with the unknown, with danger, he knew no fear and, apparently, did not know caution. But now he controlled himself, halted his horse, and waited for Ajit. He also slowed down and tried to move as quietly as possible. Everything around was shrouded in a veil of silence, occasionally broken by the rustle of hooves on the sand and the ragged breathing of riders.

It seemed that the city was asleep. In the distance, several lights flickered, apparently from lit, but already extinguishing torches. The sentries who guarded the approaches to the city and the main gates must have already fallen asleep at their posts: tonight a new, unimaginably pleasant coolness took possession of them, such as, perhaps, no night in the desert had ever known. Even Ajit, accustomed to fatigue and paying no attention to it, struggled with sleep. But now the world of dreams was trying to swallow him too, gently and unobtrusively enveloping his shoulders, clouding his mind and closing his heavy eyelids.

The next moment changed everything. It shattered the silence. The coolness was replaced by a sharp cold, the wind blew. The darkness that had enveloped this whole world a second ago was torn apart in a second, mercilessly scattered across the horizon. A flash of unimaginable power pierced the sky. Then an even more terrible, but at the same time beautiful, amazing picture unfolded before my eyes: huge clouds thickened over the city, covering the starry sky, the moon and seeming to want to swallow the whole city. These clouds were constantly moving, spinning, twisting into a whirlwind. It seemed that another moment, and the hellish tornado would collapse on the city, crumbling it to pieces, sparing no one and nothing. But this did not happen, although the ground under his feet was already beginning to shake. Amazed by what was happening, the riders stopped and slowly, without taking their eyes off what was

happening, both of them, as if on command, left their saddles and stood on the sand that had already cooled, feeling the trembling of the ground with their feet.

Thick dark clouds covered the entire sky, it seemed that even the light of the sun could not break through them. Then, somewhere in the very center of the incredible funnel that rotated over the city, flashes like flashes of lightning began to run rather slowly and dimly, but they did not rush to the ground, but repeated the movements of the clouds, as if intensifying them. Then more and more flashes of bright white light appeared, stronger, radiating away from the eye of the growing storm in a million rays. There was a clap of thunder, strange and unlike a thunderstorm, like a giant hammer breaking the heavens. And the earth echoed these blows again and again, the sound echoing off the city wall.

And then a flash, absorbing the power of all the previous ones and filled with a new one, pierced the whole world - from heaven to earth, and a huge pillar of white light fell on the city, or rather, on one of the tallest buildings - apparently, the Sultan's palace. It originated in the heart of a hundred sparks of the storm that had boiled so unexpectedly, instantly gaining strength and descending, spreading millions of tiny flashes near it. For a moment, the earth seemed to be able to calm its trembling, but the pillar of light, beating brighter with every second, did not give peace to anything - everything around, perhaps for several days of travel, was flooded with this light, similar in strength to the sun, but cold and frightening.

Along with this light, a huge, still incredible but almost invisible wave of water burst into the city. At first, only her icy breath was felt, incomparable to the pleasant coolness that gently enveloped her entire body, slowly plunging her into sleep. But here it was, gaining strength, rolling through the city, bursting out of the palace with a thousand small flashes of light, which struck literally from everywhere as if they were cramped in this huge building. And when it reached the edges of the city, the wave, almost without losing its strength, began to overflow over the edge, as if the city was a huge bowl from which water poured out, disturbed by the sharp fall of the stone. And then, already beyond the edge of the bowl, the wave seemed to slow down, turn into dust and, partially settling on the sand, rushed into the distance, carried away by the wind.

Chapter 11. Red

This time, more cautiously, controlling his senses, the Prince approached the majestic arch that preceded the throne room. The same ill-fated throne room from which he had fled so much, trying to escape his terror and icy cold. But now he was not afraid: the Sands had already tasted his soul, but they had not been able to absorb him, he had not turned into one of the monsters that had been defeated by him only recently. He was a man. He walked, thought and felt like a man. True, he did notice one strange thing: not only was he not afraid of the Pesks, but they seemed to have become something close to him, dear; with which it is inextricably linked. Perhaps, as he himself thought, the dagger was to blame - it was clear as day that he was also part of the Sands, their brainchild, a kind of key that opened a mysterious door, never seen by anyone before... or almost no one.

A quiet and unhurried golden mist, like the one that curled in clouds in the previous room, flowed away from the Clock, soaking into a new world outside the glass vessel, as if tasting it. That unusually bright white light was gone, now it was replaced by the same golden one, but its main source was the Clock itself, or rather, the Sand inside it. Large, unlike the miserable and timid dust that hovered in the air like flocks of insects, it was fascinating, it was difficult to look away from this glow. And again the Prince had this strange feeling: he again felt how one reality was superimposed on another. His admiration of the Sand inside the Clock was both a memory and what he was living now. And all this merged into one whole, soaked in the Sands.

The dagger instantly sensed all this and swept over the Prince a new wave of memories. Now the Prince remembered and realized that only a short time ago, in the same way, blindly obeying this wordless alluring call, he released the Sands, putting an end to a quiet life. It is not known how these flights of fantasy would have ended if the Prince had not paid attention to what was actually happening around the Clock. The throne room was quite large, somewhere near the ceiling huge windows let into it the coolness of the night, a little less than what the Prince remembered from the previous hall. At first, he saw the vizier brandishing his staff, raising his hands to the Clock, and muttering something. His eyes were closed and he didn't see the Prince, although that didn't mean he didn't feel his presence. Perhaps in another situation, the Prince would have rushed at the cause of all the troubles, but the Sands still held his attention, especially what happened to them at every sound that flew from Amar's lips, at every swing of his staff. It was unlike anything the Prince had ever seen before. Never before had the Sands behaved like this. They did not just echo these waving and

mutterings - in all this there was a kind of meekness, humility and obedience. It was not like a dagger that depended on the Sands and could only call them for help, which, however, was provided by the vizier almost instantly and without unnecessary delay. Something unknown to the common man was easily accessible to the vizier, he knew the Sands, felt them, and they felt him, but still it was clear to whom the primacy belonged.

Suddenly, shouting loudly and invitingly in an incomprehensible language, Amar lowered his staff to the floor, causing a rumble to spread throughout the hall, and sparks flew from the eyes of the snake that adorned the crown of this staff, instantly dissolving in the Sands. And after this blow, the Sands themselves seemed to wake up from a long-term sleep, and some of them, startled, flowed somewhere away, with a vengeance and speed, turning into a stream, into an avalanche, absorbing more and more grains of sand along the way, aimlessly swarming in the air. Obeying a single impulse, the stream rushed upward, seeped through the windows, after which a light clink of glass was heard, echoing crystal through the hall and getting lost somewhere in the depths of the palace.

The prince, distracted by the whole spectacle, ignored Amar, who slammed his staff on the floor, froze for a few moments, then sucked in the air soaked in a million grains of sand and opened his eyes. Perfectly normal and ordinary human eyes: there was not a drop of poisonous yellow shine in them, but something more terrible could be seen in them. The pairs of eyes that the Prince had seen before were literally overflowing with cruelty, cold-bloodedness towards the entire world around him and hellish, inhuman rage, mixed with the desire for someone else's death. And that's it. In the vizier's eyes, there was another subtle feature that is inherent only in the human gaze - his gaze was inhuman. In him one could see not only the desire to inflict pain, in him one could read the awareness of this desire. The desire of the sand monsters was rather thoughtless, a product of their own nature; The vizier's desire was conscious, he himself chose this path and was literally pleased with it, he reveled in thoughts of someone else's pain.

Turning majestically, he strode towards the Prince. Now he did not give the impression of the old man suffering from illness: the sands, having soaked him, gave him new strength, his step became much more confident and firm, his movements sharper, and his voice became smoother, the wheezing disappeared:

"Oh!" Amar walked confidently towards the Prince, his staff slightly thrust forward. "I see that the Prince himself has come to us, a young and brave warrior who boldly and thoughtlessly defied Time!"

Now his eyes burned with lights of delight, jubilation could be read in them, and he confidently walked forward, slowly stretching out his free hand.

-A what? No, I... It's you! You tricked me into doing it! The Prince blurted out in response.

-Is it? I just gave you a hint, literally hinted at it. The rest was done by you! Remember, remember that interest, that exorbitant curiosity that ate you at that moment. If only you could see your own eyes at this second! I bet it would only take you a couple of minutes to do it yourself, without prompting! It seems that you have discovered a new facet of yourself, a hidden corner of your soul, which you did not even know about before.

The vizier managed to embarrass the Prince. He was confused by this turn of events.

- What happened in general? Sands... What is this? Why me?

"You have discovered the Sands of Time, young Prince. You could not overcome the temptation, this piercing feeling that pulls you to do something forbidden, but immensely great and beautiful in its own way.

At these words of the vizier, the Prince felt something coming from the dagger take possession of him. The flood of false memories that were born at the vizier's words became true for him.

"But it's not too late to stop everything and bring it back, as if nothing happened. The only thing you have to do is give me the dagger!"

"My father died, these monsters are everywhere, so many ridiculous deaths... All this nightmare, horror. How can all this be fixed?

"Give me the dagger," Amar repeated, this time even more insistently. He looked at the Prince from a distance of at least twenty paces, but his gaze, imbued with confidence, pressed on the Prince as if the vizier had come close to him. And Amar, feeling this confidence, took advantage of it, and continued to meet the Prince, destroying his resolve.

"Do you see that watch?" The vizier pointed at them with his staff. "A dagger filled with a certain magic and spelled in a special way can instantly make the Clock absorb the Sands back into itself along with everything it has spawned. But no one but me can do it. Please, give me the dagger!"

These words had a little effect on the Prince: they sounded like the truth, they even calmed him down and gave him hope. But literally immediately, a new bold thought arose in his head: what if he tried to correct his mistake himself?

The next moments startled the Prince. He could have sworn that the thought only flashed through his mind, not even reflected in his

face or gaze. But for Amar, it was no secret from the moment the Prince realized it. In the vizier's eyes one could read what he already knew about this idea. This amazed the Prince. It seemed that all his thoughts were no longer a secret; any of them, as soon as they flashed in his head, immediately became part of the Sands and ceased to be his own. And the vizier could grasp the thought without any difficulty, feel it without asking permission or feeling remorse. And so, intercepting another thought, Amar, giving his voice an even more authoritative tone, said:

-Fool! Don't even try to do anything yourself! One carelessness - and you will make a mistake, compared to which your current one will seem like an innocent childish prank! He said these words, continuing to walk towards the Prince and not stopping to point his finger at him, as if pointing out his mistake.

The prince was not going to give up so easily. All the vizier's words and actions left him suspicious. Especially the way he's changed. Transformed from a sick, frowning grunt to a smug and energetic chatterbox, he looked as if that was what he was aiming for.

"And how can I trust you?" What if this is another trick? Why did you allow this to happen at all, if you say that you knew where everything was going? The prince checked the vizier.

"I tried to avert trouble several times. From the very beginning, I asked Shahraman to give me the dagger. But what could I do if the dagger belonged to you, a man of royal blood? My knowledge and words are nothing before that! But now you see where it led. I allowed this to happen so that you could see the danger, the power of temptation, feel it literally for yourselves. And now that everything has happened, it's time to make things right. Fix it as soon as possible - time is inexorably running, and soon all this will become an irreversible nightmare!

The vizier pressed the Prince with all his might, while trying not to show his true intentions. Without the dagger, he could not gain absolute power over the Sands. Besides, he took a risk as long as the Prince with the dagger was near the Clock. This must not be allowed!

"A forced sacrifice?" But then why did the Sands leave the treasury of Maharaja at all? After all, you yourself presented us with the city and the entire palace on a silver platter!

"In recent months, I have been watching Maharadzha a lot. I saw his mind shrouded in shroud, as he drew closer and closer to the idea of using the Sands. Use as a weapon. To sow death and destruction. I was looking for a way to stop him, I spent hours persuading and dissuading him, but, I repeat, who am I in front of his power? I didn't want it to turn out like this. But I have not thought of anything better," the vizier tried to speak as convincingly as possible.

Once again, the Prince felt that these words were like the truth.

"But why did you conjure over the Sands now?" The prince did not want to escape the idea that the vizier was pursuing some of his own goals all this time. "It looked like you wanted to take control of the Sand, to become its lord.

"My dear Prince, would I bother like this if I had power over the Sands of Time?" I could send a horde of monsters at you and take the dagger by force! But instead, I ask you to accept my help. Without a dagger, I can only barely hold back the Sands, which is what I've been doing all along. And where were you? Did you, like a coward, try to run away? The vizier's voice became ingratiating, he walked around the Prince, forcing him to turn back over his left and right shoulders. Now he was ready to do anything, even pretend to be weak and sick again, just to get his hands on the dagger. After all, the goal is so close. He cannot give up the Sands, which gave him strength, allowed him to be literally born again. You just need to see the Prince off again. And it seems that he succeeds! The Prince seems to believe in all this nonsense. So the Sands really are so powerful.

"You speak like a merchant in the market of Babylon! The Prince continued to doubt. "You ask for money in advance, and you promise a miracle later!" How can you believe this?

"Bad boy, why can't he calm down?" thought the vizier, and answered, without betraying irritation and trying to make his voice excited:

"Would you have believed me if I had told you all this before?" About the almost insane Maharaja, about the destructive power of the Sands and about what an irresistible temptation the opportunity to release them will be? But now you see how easy it is to turn this world from a good world into hell. You know the price of your curiosity. I see that you still have the idea of trying to correct the mistake yourself. But it will make you make a new one! Aren't you afraid to make it even worse? Maybe this time you should entrust it to me? The vizier's voice became insistent again. He even took a few steps towards the Prince with his free arm outstretched forward, which caused the Prince to step back.

And then Amar realized that he had to take a risk, he had to open his mind, his stream of thoughts, so that the Prince could feel it too. Of course, the thoughts will be fake, not real, but it should work. The prince will be convinced of the vizier's intentions and will give him the dagger! After a little hesitation, the vizier did just that. False thoughts required considerable concentration, his art of pretending was at its best now, but it was draining all his strength, distracting his thoughts from the Sands and Clocks.

The prince was about to answer something, when suddenly he saw how everything that the vizier was talking about was taking on a certain visual form, overgrown with details. It was as if he could even imagine everything from the point of view of the vizier himself. His doubts began to fade, and he slowly stretched his hand with the dagger forward.

"A few more moments and he will give it to me!" thought the vizier, trying not to show or distort the thoughts he was telling the Prince.

But suddenly something unexpected happened. The vizier was so distracted from what was happening that he lost all control over the situation. The Clock's breath lost its calm, and the throne room shook with a new wave of Sand. The vaults of the palace shuddered, and the sound of falling debris was heard. The elements, like a storm, flared up again. The vizier was now practically unable to command her. Suddenly, from somewhere above, the deafening ringing of the shattering glass of the majestic windows was heard - something large pierced them at that moment, breaking the relative calm and silence. The prince instantly threw his head up, distracting himself from the vizier, who stopped a couple of dozen paces away from him and also directed his gaze upwards.

Birds of incredible size burst into the hall through the windows, breaking them into many fragments, noisily falling to the floor almost throughout the hall. While they were at their height, it was difficult to see them in detail, from below the Prince only noted that they were unusually strong and their plumage was completely black. This made them even more formidable, frightening and fantastic. This sight was perhaps the most amazing thing the Prince had ever seen.

After making several graceful flapping of their wings, the birds one after another abruptly rushed down with great speed and reached the floor in just a moment. There was a loud clatter of claws on the marble floor. Now that the birds were much closer, the Prince could make out a lot of new details: predatory yellow eyes, like those of other monsters, but more elongated. The plumage of the birds was not so black—all the birds shimmered with a golden sheen, and the tip of each feather was indeed covered with something golden, emitting a yellow glow, exactly the same as those incredible eyes, but not bright enough to be seen from a distance. Huge claws, as if digging into the floor, crumbling it and turning it into dust, were still the same golden-yellow color. They were struck by their huge, slightly downward curved beaks, in the color of which the color of which was also mixed with the gold color of blood-red. Through the large nostrils, golden dust was oozing, reminiscent of sand.

At the moment when the birds burst into the hall, the vizier's consciousness trembled, rage flashed in his eyes, he cursed and was

slightly confused. He didn't want the birds to fly into the hall to the last, but by weakening his concentration, he couldn't keep them outside. Such an abrupt disruption of plans and confusion weakened the vizier's grip and the power of his pretense, and the Prince felt something new in the stream of thought. Now he clearly did not resemble the beautiful lies that the vizier fed him. Liar! He saw in Amar's mind the Tower of Dawn, some magical rituals, a maniacal desire to possess a dagger that had nothing to do with virtue. The vizier understood this and stopped his game. Now you need to act quickly. The Prince must not get close to the Clock!

There were a lot of birds, about a dozen, they were slightly shorter than the Prince, but still unthinkably large for ordinary birds. Landing not far from the Clock, they occupied a decent part of the hall, and again the sound of something beating was heard - this time, some of them, apparently, touched the vases placed around the hall with their wings, and they crumbled to pieces. As soon as the birds landed on the floor, they moved towards the Hourglass, which, only now the Prince noticed, stood exactly in the center of the hall, its top pointing straight to the center of the dome, where a decent-sized hole now gaped, exposing the night sky. Their predatory eyes shone even brighter as they approached their target. The sound of broken glass being thrown by birds was heard, which covered the floor under the windows in an even layer.

Then, as if on silent command, some of the birds fluttered into the air, but not high and still gliding gracefully to the top of the Clock.

Stopping in the midst of unimaginable but frightening splendor, the two fascinated travelers watched him. For some time, the pillar of white light continued to grow, throwing out more sparks in all directions, and then almost instantly disappeared. The last white flashes swept through the clouds, and everything ended in an instant. The light dried up, and the clouds, which by that time had covered almost the entire sky, began to creep apart, melt, again giving way to a clear starry night...

-What was that? Asha asked uncertainly and frightened, looking at his companion.

"I don't know what it was. But I don't think it's anything good," Ajit said in the same voice, but looking away.

In the next instant, an invisible wave of ice swept over both of them, followed by an equally cold wind that tossed and tousled their hair.

After standing for another minute in indecision, they slowly moved on foot towards the city, still feeling this wave. It gave the impression of something indelible, something that, once eaten very deeply, remained in a person for a long time or even forever.

"Very strange clouds, too thick, not like when it rains," Asha tried to reason.

"They could not have been rainy - they appeared too quickly. And they disappeared too quickly," Ajit replied.

"Have you seen this light, these sparks?" This is something very strange... I just don't understand! - Asha did not calm down.

"And you won't understand until we know what it was," Ajit said, and immediately thought, "Or rather, until you know."

Again, he averted his eyes to the side, looking at the city, watching the scene he saw. It stuck deep in my memory and at the first opportunity popped up, striking the imagination again and again. But he did not expect to see her again with his own eyes.

The first four birds, smoothly flying towards the Clock, wrapped their huge claws around the metal handrails that formed part of the frame for the Clock. It was a large metal frame, encrusted with many small gems and gold jewelry, and dressed in dark brown wood, absorbing metal and decorated with sweeping patterns. Among other things, the Clock was hung with chains that entangled it from top to bottom, giving it an even more mysterious appearance. At the bottom, the Clock rested on a large round wooden plate, the edges of which were particularly thickly patterned and carved in such a way that in some places pieces of wood protruded from it, like tongues of flame rising upwards. Iron supports, crashing into the tree, meandered upwards, piercing through the plate, and wrapped themselves in large rings at the top, around which giant yellow claws closed...

"What does all this mean?" The Prince whispered with wide eyes in surprise. He was too discouraged by what had happened and could not yet fully appreciate such a sharp turn of events. This was very much to the vizier's advantage: the Prince would not have time to do anything, and he would be able to steer the Clock right from under his nose to a safe place. To the most impregnable place of the palace!

"Farewell, young Prince!" I leave you alone with what you have done," the vizier hissed angrily in response. "I deprive you of the opportunity to correct your mistake!"

And as if to confirm his speech, the flapping of huge wings was heard, dispersing the Sand, and the Clock lifted off the ground. Only now did the Prince realize how heavy they were: the giant birds

barely managed to lift them to half the height of the Prince. Several more birds then flew up, grabbing the Clock closer to the base, forcing it into a horizontal position in the air. Meanwhile, the vizier moved a little away from the Prince, examining the Clock and admiring the grace of the birds.

The prince, slightly frightened and surprised that they were moving in his direction, staggered back and, after walking a few steps, found himself again in a hall with huge balconies. The feathered sand creatures, gaining speed, continued to advance towards the Prince, forcing him to start running. He turned and ran, but it was only when he felt the breeze fade from the flapping of his wings that he stopped and turned. The birds, having flown out from under the balcony, now abruptly changed direction and rushed to a huge, almost wall-to-wall window. And it was clear from their movements that they were not going to stop. A few moments later, the rest of the birds flew out of the first hall after them and, catching up with them very quickly, continued flying on the sides, on a par with the Clock.

And then, like a huge shell destroying a wall, they struck the glass, shattering it into many fragments, most of which fell loudly outward, falling from a great height and being lost in the abyss of the night. Immediately, as if in pursuit, the Sand rushed out and, oozing through the window, and, carried away by the wind, also melted in the coolness of the night. Fascinated, the Prince watched everything that was happening, he felt a strange incredible chill spread through his body, not like the Sands breathed, but rather a chill of surprise that made him feel all the improbability of what was happening. The prince felt his hands trembling, he gradually lost the thread between the reality around him and his own mind. Putting his hand to his face, he felt a cold burning sensation emanating from it. Then he literally began to shake - apparently, the realization of everything that had happened continued to collapse on him in more and more waves. Clutching his head with both hands, passing his hair through his fingers, the Prince sighed heavily and intermittently, continuing to stagger, and still refused to believe his eyes.

Then, still in the same state, he rushed to the broken window. As he ran closer, he saw the light of the moon, which was full and tearing through the darkness as the wings of birds had broken the silence. Black silhouettes appeared against the moon disk, and now all the birds were carrying the Clock, continuing to soar upwards towards the lonely tall tower, which could hardly be distinguished against the black sky.

Breathing in the fresh night air, the Prince stopped at the very edge - further in front of him there was an impenetrable darkness, apparently hiding a huge height, and the next step should be a step

into the unknown. But the Prince did not do it: something else kept him in this life, perhaps the realization of his own mistake, the desire to correct everything and return his father. And then a lump rolled up to his throat, squeezing a tear out of him, a lot of memories and feelings, a sharp pain in his head. He staggered and, as if carried away by the flowing Sands, almost took this very step into the unknown. It was from this that his consciousness instantly cleared, he opened his eyes wide and recoiled from the edge. However, apparently, because his eyes had already become accustomed to the darkness, he could not help noticing one detail, the realization of which came to him gradually, over the course of almost a whole minute: there, beyond the edge, there was no abyss - it was blocked by a large semicircular balcony. Only now did the Prince notice that it was partially bathed in moonlight, and so brightly that it was strange and incomprehensible why the young man had not noticed it earlier. Along with this realization, a smile touched his lips. And then the Prince laughed loudly and shrilly, his laughter reverberating in all directions, breaking the silence of the starry night. But his eyes did not laugh at all - they, on the contrary, were filled with sadness and rage. He cursed everything that happened for the injustice. Then, stopping laughing and inhaling another gust of light wind, he turned and strode away from the window, drawing his dagger as he went. The prince was tormented by a vague hope that he would be able to extort from the vizier how to put an end to all this.

And then, as if hearing his silent request, Amar came out of the throne room, and slowly and dignified began to move towards the Prince, and he began to meet the vizier. As he drew closer, Amar stretched out his hand more and more, as if to seize the dagger before he approached the Prince.

The doubtful Prince looked not only at the vizier, but at the whole hall, especially at the place near which his father had died, and sorrowful memories began to come to him again. After a few steps, his gaze fell on a huge stone - a stone block, on which he had left a few drops of his own blood. And his brain began to repeat all the events again, this time more clearly. And then the Prince grabbed the smallest shred of his memories, imagining clearly, even more clearly than he could show the dagger, the whistle of the arrow crashing into his father's neck, and then the faint flash of something red, how quickly, imperceptibly, but invitingly it flashed before disappearing somewhere into the unknown. But there was something strange about this memory - it was too alluring for such a short and pathetic fragment of memory. And with every step the Prince succumbed to this influence more and more, it drew him in, called him into the same unknown, which for some reason did not frighten him. This little memory gave off some inexplicable warmth, not at all like the

cold of the Sand. Gradually, the Prince began to doubt his hope, that the vizier could really help him in any way, as if this very fragment of memory had instilled in him a new feeling, the ability to grasp the truth, the ability to abandon the illusions that clouded his mind, and to make the only right choice.

Even before the Prince took off, clutching his sword and sheathing his dagger, Amar felt these changes in the Prince's mind, though he did not understand what caused them. But there was not even a shadow of fright on his face - the vizier continued to step towards the Prince with even greater confidence, but his gaze was directed somewhere in the distance, through the Prince, behind the broken glass, perhaps after the wonderful birds. With each blow of his staff, the eyes of the snake crowning its top flashed with small sparkles, which, judging by Amar's confident gait, had ceased to be a support for walking, but had now become something like a sign of power over the Sands, something full of extraordinary magic capable of unquestioningly subduing them.

And then what the Prince least expected happened. He was ready to meet serious resistance from Amar, ready to fly back, thrown back by the power of magic unknown to him. But he hadn't expected his sword, aimed at its target, whistling through the air, scaring away the clouds of Sand that swarmed around. Amar simply disappeared. In those moments when he took his last steps, his eyes burned with some kind of fire, mockery and frightening indifference in them. And with each of these steps, he seemed to merge with the Sands, melting into them, splitting his body into millions of grains of sand. And now he disappeared. The prince, who had rushed at him too sharply, flew forward and, not expecting anything like this and losing his balance, fell to the floor, and so unsuccessfully that he ran his hand into the tip of his own sword, staining it with blood. With your own blood, not with the vizier's.

Letting out a wild cry, not so much from pain as from annoyance at this incredible blunder, if you can call it that, the Prince tried to get up. The wound was bleeding heavily, draining his strength, and a puddle of thick and sticky blood had already formed on the marble floor, which continued to grow with every second. Having failed the first time, the Prince tried to get up again, and again failed, this time even more unfortunate: he accidentally leaned his wounded hand on the place where the puddle had been. The palm slipped, and he plopped down his chest on the hard rock again, completely staining his sleeve. This little incident threw him into a fit of rage. The prince made a desperate dash, jumped to his feet, kicked his sword with a swing so that it rolled back, strumming loudly, for a good twenty steps. Then he frantically tore at his own sleeve, trying to get rid of it: he was incredibly annoyed by the sight of his own blood.

The prince turned back abruptly and saw how the Sand, still retaining some outlines of Amar, continued slowly, but more confidently and persistently, without losing direction, moving towards the window, turning into a kind of stream, and soaring upwards as soon as it got outside.

The torn and thrown sleeve fell into a pool of blood and now lay in it, continuing to be soaked through with a dark scarlet liquid. The prince examined his wound - the blade of the sword sliced through his entire palm, from wrist to index finger, slightly obliquely. He felt especially pain when he tried to clench his hand into a fist - if he succeeded, he felt blood begin to flow from his hand with even greater force on both sides of the clenched fist and through his fingers trembling with pain.

After standing like this for a few seconds, the Prince felt the rage leave him, giving way to some strange feeling - a desire to run awakened in him, but not to escape from something, but on the contrary, in pursuit of something new. No matter what it was supposed to bring, the Prince felt that he had to grab it. Grab it, absorb it, and, once found, never let go again.

However, this new feeling did not give him the same strength that went with the rage. He became lethargic again, his left arm trembled, and he felt the bleeding increase again. Then the Prince's gaze fell on his other sleeve, the one on his right arm. With all his strength, he pulled on it, but this time not everything went so smoothly: a little cracked, it did not give way, as it did the first time, even though the sleeve was almost dry. Although, probably, his wounded palm was also to blame: it did not allow him to make the same sharp and strong movements that he could easily make with his right.

Repeating one attempt after another, the Prince approached the target, filling with a new rage, which this time instantly disappeared even before he made another dash. And finally, the cherished crack of torn fabric was heard - he managed to tear the sleeve almost to the elbow. Then, with another sharp movement, the Prince turned the scrap into an ordinary strip of cloth and wrapped it around his left palm, trying to pull the wound as tight as possible to somehow slow down the flow of blood.

Carefully examining his hand, he tried to move it, clenching and unclenching his fist, closing his eyes and biting his lip every time he felt flashes of pain that gave off a strong tremor in his fingers. He then walked over to the sword, picked it up, shook the blood off it, and sheathed it rather clumsily, nearly dropping it in the process.

Then, standing almost in front of the huge arch, he glanced inside the throne room, remembering how he had escaped from it quite recently, in incredible terror. With an expressionless grin, he

turned away from the entrance to the hall and walked away. However, the memories, very vivid, still living in him, did not leave him. The next moment, he literally felt the flashes of the dagger that it emitted from the sheath behind him, one after another, one piercing and icy blue, the second softer, but covering his entire back with a slight chill, yellow. The prince had already become related to the feelings that each of these flashes brought, but this did not stop admiring them every time.

And then the flashes stopped, apparently because the Prince was distracted by them and managed to discard the memories that were not needed now. And he was glad of it. This little joy, the first in the last few terrible hours, spread over his body, warmed him, gave him strength, made him walk more confidently and cheerfully, even a shadow of a smile slipped on his face - barely noticeable and immediately disappeared. But again his memory caught on a small island of consciousness and pierced the same meager memory into the Prince's mind. And he, obeying this call, turned sharply and began to look around, as if looking for something or someone. For some reason it seemed to him that this memory did not leave him, not only because it was unusually vivid (it seemed to him just like that now), although short, but also because it was not a memory, but a reality. A reality that constantly eluded him, but still seemed to be somewhere nearby. Somewhere where the eye could catch it.

But, alas, no matter how much he wandered with them on the balconies, on the walls and throughout the entire hall, nothing like what he was holding in his mind now caught his eye. A little upset, he turned back to the window and wandered on, continuing to cast rare, hopeful glances somewhere behind, as if calling on what gave him this burning memory. But something about him kept him from losing heart—yes, he was upset, but nothing more. He continued to harbor hope, despite the fact that it had long since melted away and disappeared somewhere, leaving the Prince alone with the illusion in which he now continued to believe.

As he walked to the edge, he felt the familiar sense of the unknown again, the coolness of the night wind. And suddenly one sudden gust of it struck the glass, causing both the Prince and the glass to shake in their own way. And then, unable to withstand the force of the wind, a decent piece of glass broke off and fell down, crumbling into glass dust, mixing with the Sand and flying away with the wind. But even before the broken fragment began to gain speed, rushing downward, the Prince managed to react and jump to the side. Or rather, he thought it was to the side, but in fact he jumped down to the balcony already completely flooded with moonlight. Everything would be fine if not for the impressive height of almost three times the height of the Prince. Trying to soften the fall, he put

his hands out in front of him and, having reached the marble balcony, tried to roll, but immediately felt a burning sensation in his left hand: the fabric of the sleeve, rough for the wound, sharply traced the cut, which instantly weakened, clumsily twisted the hand, and in a second the Prince found himself lying on his back with the bandage slightly removed from his arm.

He thought:

"Well, so much the better. Now you don't have to think about how to get down from there."

And he directed his gaze upwards, instantly meeting the gaze of millions of stars, the black sky, feeling the cold coming from the stone that had cooled down in half the night.

Lying like this, on his back, the Prince tried to think of what he should do next. He knew where the Clock should be now, and if he wanted to, he could find his way there; he had a dagger that turned out to be able to put an end to all this madness, but Amar's words stuck in his memory too firmly - he was really afraid that he could only spoil everything and doom everyone to eternal suffering, including himself.

Apart from this fragmentary information and conjectures, the Prince had practically nothing, and this frightened him very much, he felt fear that made him get up and sit down, and then a few minutes later get up and walk along the balcony, still looking upwards, as if the stars with their cold silence were able to prompt him to answer.

Approaching the edge of the balcony, the Prince leaned both hands on the smooth stone railing and appreciated the picture that opened before him: the balcony was at a very decent distance from the ground, a little further away towered the cherished Tower of Dawn, the path to which was not close, and part of it ran along the top of a huge rampart, which cut somewhere below into the very foundation of the palace and windingly went away from it. becoming a little higher before breaking off at the small square that preceded the entrance to the tower. Palm groves rustled on either side of the rampart, which could only be heard because of the darkness, but could not be seen.

Then he turned his attention to the way the Sands behaved - flowing to the edge, they, as if losing their support under them, rushed down into these very groves, to the huge wall, and, having reached a new support, they spread further, and without losing their strength. After a while, the Prince noticed a faint, barely perceptible glow at the very top of the tower - the giant clock continued to emit Sand, which, falling down, met its other waves, became even stronger and continued to spread everywhere, absorbing reality.

Feeling a gentle breeze suddenly wash over his back, the Prince involuntarily turned, and once again his mind was shocked: huge

golden-white clouds of Sand were billowing right next to him. Like a huge bonfire, they did not obey the general current, and even hindered it, absorbing its forces and burning even brighter, and, rising higher and higher, soared just above the place from which the Prince had recently jumped. He took a few steps forward, apparently out of interest and unable to resist the alluring glow. The prince felt a piercing cold, and the Sands that surrounded him were almost blinding with their bright light. Now they no longer gave the impression of that light and soft dust that entangled everything around, now the Sands became truly material, he could run his hand over them and feel their resistance; At first glance, they resembled a thick fog, just as white, but more tangible. And this sand mist enveloped the Prince's body and mind, and the latter, apparently having experienced too many shocks lately, began to melt; The realization of reality turned into pitiful scraps, shreds, fragments. And then it disappeared altogether. The last thing the Prince remembered before he collapsed to the ground, exhausted, was the icy burning of the dagger, which seeped through even his scabbard and clothes. So icy that several waves ran through his body, forcing him to open his eyes sharply and widely, his eyelids that with incredible force tried to close and carry the Prince's consciousness away from this world completely. In the last seconds, he even fancied that he heard some indistinct voices.

Chapter 12. White

Asha, the first to overcome indecision, moved forward: partly he was driven by interest, partly by the desire to achieve his goal - to save the princess.

Already from a distance it was felt that the city seemed to be deserted. The breath of life flew away with the white flashes. The huge gate was slightly ajar, and a slightly yellowish mist was oozing through it.

Asha stood in front of the gate for a while, not daring to enter. Ajit, trying to move his horse as quietly as possible, approached him and gave him a questioning look, not daring to say anything aloud. Although the thoughts were even more dangerous.

Finally cutting the thread of fear that seemed to hold them on this side of the gate, Asha and Ajit squeezed through a rather narrow gap and entered the city. In front of them stretched the same magnificent wide road, which after fifty paces disappeared from sight in the silence of the night. Huge staircases climbed along the city wall, on either side of the gate. There was not a sound around, as if all living things had evaporated at once.

And yet the feeling of anxiety did not let them go, pursuing, like despair, on their heels. Or maybe it was despair? Something that was now visible in every speck of dust in the night air. Ajit looked around warily, as if looking for something specific, familiar to him for a long time, but no less terrifying.

By this time, the clouds above my head had finally dissipated, revealing a beautiful starry sky, burning with a million golden lights, each of which was somehow especially cute. It seemed that if you remove one of them, the whole picture would lose its unique charm. The moonlight spread softly on the roofs of the nearest houses, fell abruptly on the trees, the leaves of which cut it and sprinkled white and blue drops on the sides. The celestial mob complemented all this with some kind of all-encompassing silence, making the heart flutter from every accidental rustle. I wanted to breathe in the night forever, feeling the sweet aroma of the capricious breeze. Like the most swampy quagmire, the night sucked in anyone who was able to feel its greatness even for a second, absorbed completely and completely. The whole mind, the whole soul, the whole heart and the whole body. It seemed that the stars themselves breathed this wondrous cool air, each other's light and the blackness of the sky.

Suddenly, Asha, who was walking a little behind, stopped abruptly. His face showed a desire to go on, but his body seemed to refuse to obey him. Fear clung to him from head to toe in one sharp movement and chained him to the ground. Ajit, as if soaked in the

fear of his companion, also stopped and began to listen even more attentively. And for good reason...

A couple of steps away, each of them seemed to hear an unsteady step, not quite like a human one, because it was so elusive that it could not be heard, but felt. Yes, to feel it. It seemed that an invisible person was wandering past them not along the same stone road, but as if seeping through their thoughts, absorbing their smallest crumbs in order to gain a little strength and take a few more steps. The feeling that all this evoked was difficult to describe. Sometimes it seemed to Asha that he was about to hear someone's voice and, if not follow it, then at least listen attentively. And it was as if he himself was reaching for this ghostly breath, but he could not take the last step, the thread between him and the unknown broke with each attempt.

Ajit felt something similar, but not so clearly. He did not wait for a voice and did not run to meet it, but he also felt someone's presence, barely noticeable. A few seconds passed, and he felt another faint movement a little away from the first, but inextricably linked with it. It is not clear whether all this was part of something single or whether they were two unknown satellites quietly sneaking by.

And then, as suddenly as it had appeared, there vanished that strange etheric vibration in the air, which seemed to have no material form, and could only produce a soft rustle that could only be heard at night, when everything was asleep.

Maybe this is the best reward in a person's life - to escape from the noisy life and turn into silence, which comes to life every night and continues its mysterious path, full of wonders incomprehensible to an ordinary person? It is a miracle to help someone so that he himself does not notice this influence, whisper something in a dream and walk away, not expecting gratitude for what he does not seem to do. Quietly wander the world in search of strong souls in need of help. To walk a million roads without sleep and rest, giving everything from yourself, even what only such an invisible and disembodied ghost has, living according to completely different laws together with people, but imperceptibly for them.

A random gust of wind dispersed the ghostly vision, scattering it to the sides.

"Did you hear anything too?" Ajit suddenly couldn't stand it and asked.

"Yes... Somewhere nearby, but I didn't see anything," Asha answered, coming to his senses. "Something strange is going on here, don't you think?"

Before Ajit could answer, he suddenly heard a much clearer sound of footsteps. He and Asha hurried to hide in the shade of the

nearest bush, which was just above them. And they immediately stared with tired eyes into the darkness, whose silence had been so boldly broken a couple of seconds ago.

A soldier walked past them on the road. Judging by the direction he had chosen and the confidence on his face, he was about to leave the city. In his step there was a kind of anxiety, similar to fright. Sometimes he almost started running, but he still moved quite slowly. Asha and Ajit had been silently watching the stranger's procession for more than a minute, and were not going to show themselves to him: now they needed to be as inconspicuous as possible. The soldier was already approaching the gate and was about to disappear behind it, if his attention had not been attracted by a sharp metallic sound that came quite clearly from somewhere to the side. He stopped instantly and slowly turned in the direction of the sound, which had already been repeated several times, as if considering whether he should now move away from this place or stay and find out what was going on. The hesitation running through his body literally tore him apart, his hands trembling, and it was visible even from the distance that Asha and Ajit were. And he felt it himself, but he could not do anything to calm the trembling and perform at least some action. It was not fear that stopped him, but something else. Making a choice, he seemed to be on the border of two worlds, balancing between the desire to help and indifference. Yes, to help – he understood perfectly well what these sounds meant. These were pathetic attempts by some miraculously surviving soldier to fend off one or more sand killers who did not tolerate any presence of life and tried to destroy it as quickly as possible.

The clang of metal was heard not far away, mixed with the sounds of someone's running and soft, short-breathing. In the silence, everyone, even the faintest sound, flared up as a sheaf of sparks, which were carried by the wind in all directions for a long distance. A moment later, a Persian soldier jumped out of the bushes on the opposite side of the road, crouching. Running to the middle, he stopped and turned to meet the sand monster chasing him and tried to strike. In this movement of his, despair and fear were clearly visible. It seemed that death was already standing behind him almost close to him and hugging him by the shoulders. Catching this desperate movement, the yellow-eyed monster, which was larger than its victim, responded with a blow so powerful that the Persian's sword made a loud clang and flew to the side. And before he could rush after him, he felt a cold blade cut into his stomach. For some reason, he grabbed it with both hands, took a step back and, closing his eyes, fell dead. At the same moment, another sword plunged into the monster: the first soldier ran up and tried to attack at a run. He overcame his indecision, and this choice seemed to tilt him in one of

the directions between which he hesitated. But the cruelty, or rather blind rage that filled his eyes, did not allow him to stay there for long, literally pulling him out of there by force. This confrontation within him could not continue indefinitely and began to burst out in the form of bright yellow flashes. The sand still soaked him through, although initially it was not noticeable externally. Now, as if he felt the strength, he was rushing out, helping the internal discord that was tearing the soldier apart, depriving him of his human nature. And at the same time, he lost his right to choose. And the Sand had already made his choice and was getting closer to his goal with every second, and this choice was made not a second or a minute ago, but at the very moment when the Sands appeared. And since then, there has not been a single change. From the very beginning, they contained an ideal and indestructible cruelty, imbued with absolute knowledge, but completely aimless, designed not to create, but to destroy. And one day, the Sands had to burst out to tear human hearts and make a void out of kindness, filling the world with all the darkest and most terrible that is hidden in the most secret corners of human souls. And gaining even more power, soaking in this blackness, Sand won. Slowly approaching the face of the doomed, the sandy death corroded his body, scattering clouds of yellow dust around. Having quickly dealt with everything except the neck and head, the Contradiction took over them as well. Cracks ran from his eyes, destroying his face. Death stubbornly and even stubbornly climbed the soldier's cheeks. And now only his eyes remained of his face. They did not lose their human color until the last moment, but in the end, as if surrendering to the mercy of a ruthless enemy, they first turned black, and then threw two insanely bright and almost white, blinding rays of light, after which a random breath carried two small clouds of glowing dust in different directions. And only a handful of golden ashes, mercilessly scattered by a strong wind rushing from nowhere, reminded that a living person had just stood here.

As if deliberately crushing this last reminder with his foot, the unharmed monster moved straight towards Ashe and Ajit, who were fascinated by everything that was happening, although each of them was surprised in their own way. Absolute silence and bated breath did not help them - the monster heard their thoughts and became more and more irritated with each beat of their hearts. And it was absolutely impossible to calm the flow of thoughts.

Quickly realizing what was happening, both warriors jumped out of the bushes and, without agreeing, surrounded the sandy enemy from different sides, apparently trying to confuse him. There was no point in hiding now: the enemy was clearly defined, and it was not known if any of the people were still alive.

Asha, drawing his sword, was the first to make a sharp lunge towards the enemy and almost made a fatal mistake, similar to the one made a few minutes ago by a frightened Persian soldier, whose lifeless body lay very nearby, tirelessly reminding of the danger of rash actions. Asha's blow did not cause the enemy any harm at all. He, in turn, immediately swung his sword, slicing through the air with a terrible whistle. It was the air, because at the last moment the Indian managed to catch the intention of the monster, and it is not clear how - he did not see it, but felt it in the air a moment before the very movement. Not at all discouraged by the small setback, Asha continued the battle: crouching, he immediately hit the monster in the legs and instantly dived to the side, because the unbalanced enemy fell on him. It was very large, and Asha decided that he would not take much pleasure in being crushed by this massive body. The whole fight lasted no longer than a couple of seconds, so Ajit did not have time to join it. Or maybe he wasn't going to. Although his next movements clearly denied it. He just waited for an opportune moment and rushed to help Asha. But, unlike the chaotic movements of the latter, Ajit chose the tactics of single and accurate blows. Taking a sharp step and raising his sword above his head, he jumped on the back of the enemy, who for some reason stopped following him and was distracted by Asha. Despite his age, Ajit jumped forward with the agility of a youth, thrusting his sword into his broad back, resting his feet on it after jumping and grabbing the enemy's left shoulder with his free hand, hanging on it. And immediately he pressed the sword even harder, so that its tip appeared on the other side from the monster's chest, while leaning his whole body back. But the enemy was already falling forward - Asha struck a moment ago. Therefore, Ajit flew to the ground with the monster. At the end of their fall, the sound of a blade hitting a stone was heard. But Asha immediately noticed that something unusual was going on - Ajit's sword seemed to be hurting the enemy... Falling, he stopped resisting. At this time, Asha noticed a bright golden-yellow glow that seemed to emanate from Ajit's chest and lasted for more than one second and flared up more and more with each new one. After a few moments, his sword flashed with the same light. But it was not the sword itself that glowed, it was the Sand that burst out of the monster's body. However, once outside, it did not fly away with the wind, but began to wrap itself around the blade that released it from its imprisonment, like some kind of plant, impregnating it and at the same time obeying it. As the light became unbearably bright and Ajit's hand, drowning in it and still holding the sword tightly, trembled, Asha rose from the ground and let out a surprised sigh full of incomprehension. In Ajit's eyes, on the contrary, there was absolute certainty, as if it was not the first time he had encountered

all this. But the horror on his face at the same time as the persistence proved that he was not very happy about it.

That breath seemed to bring Ajit back to the real world, tearing him away from contact with the Sands. He pulled the sword from his crumbling back and grabbed something on his chest with his hand, instantly extinguishing the strange light. Getting up from the ground, he abruptly lowered his left hand down, but the glow did not resume. It was gone, but a locket hanging from a chain was visible on his chest.

-A what... What was that? What is going on in general? Asha asked confusedly, with a tremor in his voice. In his eyes now, you could read that he was ready to hear anything but scorching silence.

-I don't know! Ajit shouted sharply, even rudely.

"But..." another Indian squeezed out even more uncertainly.

-A what?!

-Medallion...

"What's wrong with him?!"

"It glowed!"

"You thought so!"

"But..." Asha repeated himself, and from the realization of this he almost turned to a whisper.

-Stop it! Pull yourself together! You are afraid, and fear is our main enemy now! Ajit felt his hands trembling as he spoke.

Asha broke. Unable to withstand such a confident pressure, he opened his mouth for the last time, but stopped and without making a sound, believed Ajit. But the excitement did not leave his chest - it constantly heaved with deep sighs. His heart was pounding so hard that it seemed as if it was about to jump out of the bone cage with his life, tearing the ribs into pathetic splinters. It is possible that only the hope that lived inextinguishably in every drop of his soul kept life alive in his trembling body. And this very hope permeated Asha more and more and even seemed to spill around, slowly turning into timid confidence. As if she could exist even in the void, released outward, she possessed some incredible life-giving power that could hold life even if it was too close to the brink of death.

"Let's move on. I don't think our adventures are over yet," Ajit said vaguely.

"Yes," Asha replied immediately, looking at the crushed handful of Sand. For some reason, he wanted to believe that this warrior was not dead. After all, a few minutes ago he was so real, so...

Ajit interrupted Asha's thoughts by placing his hand on his shoulder and saying forcefully:

-Let's go!

And in absolute silence they moved further along the road, clinging to its right edge.

Chapter 13. Headlight

When the Prince regained consciousness, he found himself still lying on the same marble floor on the balcony. It was still night, which meant that he had not been there for long. Not long in time, but not in terms of the amount of what he experienced in his dreams. If it could be called a dream.

Rubbing his eyes with one hand, he leaned on the cold stone floor with the other and stood up. Blinking his eyes a few times, he looked around, at the same time trying to figure out what had happened and reconstruct the picture of recent events. He remembered, though rather vaguely, a patch of red. He remembered the white and yellow clouds that swallowed him. He remembered that he had seen something while in a dream. But he forgot what exactly. Or rather, he could not remember at once, but some fragments of sleep were deposited in his head, and he put them together one by one. However, the picture still seemed very vague. Finding nothing special in her, he took everything that had recently happened to him for an ordinary delirious dream and tried to throw it away from him. The prince walked to the edge of the balcony and stared at the night sky. The cool wind was like a morning breeze, and a slight frost ran down my skin. One dark spot stood out sharply among the entire sky - the Tower of Dawn blocked the stars, and it seemed as if someone had cut off a whole piece from the sky. The sand dust in the air dissipated a little, and the very cloud that the Prince had entered was gone, although the air was still somehow heavy and stuffy - the Sand did not disappear, it simply became invisible and absorbed into every particle of space.

He walked several times over the place where huge clouds swirled. No problem. The same empty air as ten steps away, as on the edge of the balcony and, probably, all over the city. He walked even further, closer to the wall from which he had fallen so unsuccessfully, shards of broken glass glittering everywhere, and in one place there were two dark spots. The prince bent down to them, blood. Probably his own. It flowed because he crashed his hands into these fragments during the fall. And it must have been very painful. But he did not remember this pain. And now I did not feel it. He looked at his hands - one completely clean, without wounds, the second wrapped in a strip of white cloth, but it seemed to be completely healthy. He unwound the tight bandage: indeed, the arm was completely intact, there were no cuts, blood stains, or even scars on it. Although he clearly remembered how he cut his hand on the sword. And this made him feel somehow uncomfortable. Of course, it's not scary, but somehow uncomfortable. Surprise was mixed with disbelief. But it

was foolish to resist the obvious truth, it would not be lost: the Sands healed his hand.

-No! This cannot be! For some reason, the Prince said aloud.

He did not believe that the Sands, who wanted him dead, had suddenly changed their attitude towards him. They still seemed to him a mortal threat, and the Prince was looking for some other explanation for what had happened. But he could not find it. He tried to bury himself as deeply as possible in his memories that had been discarded a moment ago. Something hazy and shapeless hung in his memory. A few bright spots smeared on a huge canvas.

Spots... The Prince's mind latched on to this word and began to frantically recall something. He walked in a dream. Yes, he did not stand still. Where was he going? He could not remember this. No, he didn't go, he ran! From someone or somewhere. A lot of blue light... And then night. No, there was no night, it seemed to him. But what happened then? Water! A large fountain with water. He vividly remembered dipping both hands into the water and washing his face. As if a life-giving coolness ran through my hands, taking pain with it... No, everything is wrong! An incoherent set of spots. Yes! A spot in the air! Lots of spots, different colors! And for some reason, one white and one black. And he fled from the latter. Towards the yellow light. It warmed and healed his hand! So, after all, Sand helped him. Literally saved him!

All these leaps of consciousness made the Prince dizzy, and he sat down on the floor.

"So, so, so! He said to himself and began to plunge into his memories once more.

The first thing he saw was himself, lying on his side in the moonlight on the marble floor, knees bent to his head. But at that moment, he felt like he was in someone else's body, and this someone was stepping back. Slowly, step by step, to the edge of the balcony, to the railing... and beyond them, through the air, into the unknown night distance. And then everything went out and got lost in the fog. And he saw the world with his own eyes. The line between dream and reality was lost, and the Prince was completely confused. Sometimes he began to think that he was still in a dream. But he quickly became convinced of this - all his feelings were too real now.

Suddenly, someone's face popped up in front of him. Not quite human, emaciated, with blackened eyes, in the center of which a white pupil burned. And he saw himself in those eyes. He held out his hand... And in an instant, everything disappeared, his face blurred in the air, and he woke up.

Thoughts flew like a swarm of bees in the Prince's head, but he was never able to put them together. And in addition, he remembered the red flash again. He looked around: from the balcony, on either

side of the window, two wide staircases led somewhere. He went to the left one, climbed it, and found that it led to the balcony in the hall where he had fought his father.

Here, at the top, the walls were of a different color, brownish-red, made of wood. They were hung with paintings along their entire length, and not far from the door through which the Prince had entered a couple of moments ago, there was another one, but the entrance to it was slightly closed... with a red curtain. Exactly red. His consciousness, which had been in chaos for more than an hour, suddenly turned into something harmonious and understandable. Everything fell into place, but it didn't get any better. Why did he remember this curtain so much? He left the Sands to meet the alluring unknown, and it turned out to be a meaningless pathetic rag. A stupid illusion that led him astray. The prince knew that something was clearly wrong with his head. He walked to the edge and rested both hands on the railing. His gaze was fixed downwards, but he looked as if into emptiness. He sank into formless thoughts, his mood deteriorated sharply, although he was already uncomfortable. And it would have been even worse if the random sound had not torn him out of the whirlwind of his own thoughts, which mercilessly devoured him. He abruptly raised his head and saw on the opposite side, on the same balcony, a girl in red with burning black hair. The same captive he had noticed during the desert trek. The one that...

She saw him, and with a frightened cry she ran away, throwing aside the same curtain as she ran.

-Wait! The prince shouted after her, holding out his hand in her direction.

His call, echoing through the hall, went unanswered, only the sound of rapid retreating footsteps was heard.

Now the presence of any truly living person was incredibly important to the Prince. Maybe to calm down and understand what is happening. Never had the feeling of loneliness rolled up to him so strongly, never hit him so painfully. He felt a strange sensation in his chest - as if something was missing, as if a piece had been torn out of it or a heart had been taken out, and this emptiness caused a burning pain. And only someone's presence could fill it. Let it be a frightened Indian prisoner - it did not matter at all now. The concepts of "master" and "slave" simply could not exist now. Everyone was now divided into people and non-people. And it seems that there were much more of the latter.

He wanted to rush after the stranger, but he did not know how to run through the air, and, realizing this in time, he ran along the railing towards the window. Running to the wall, he examined it more closely: from a distance he saw a small ledge that went around the window at the top - he could quickly get to the other side. Stepping

back a few steps for a run, he abruptly rushed forward to the wall, and when he reached it, he took a few steps along it, stretching his right arm as high as possible and at the same time trying to push up with his left. And he almost managed to catch on, but when he reached the ledge, his hand, damp with sweat, treacherously slid along the beam, and the Prince flew down with an extremely puzzled look. His mistake was that when he ran up the wall, he had advanced too far to the left and now had every chance of falling from a great height. But, fortunately, the Prince managed to stretch out his right arm and grasp it around the railing, which was not sharp and, apart from the pain from the blow, did not feel anything special. However, this position with his legs hanging down, without any support, did not suit him very much, and he threw his left hand over the railing and immediately climbed back up to the balcony. But he was not going to retreat, although it would have been much easier to go back down the stairs to the balcony outside, and then climb the right to the other balcony and rush after the girl, who had probably already run away. But now stubbornness took possession of him, and he again stepped back a few steps to accelerate better. But this time he acted more deliberately, first pushing off the railing, and then continuing to run up the wall, leaning a little to the right, not wanting to add to the death toll that night at the expense of his life. And so, two palms, carefully wiped on the trouser legs, caught on the ledge. Now he had to move carefully to the left, trying not to press on the glass. Or it is better to dangle both legs down, relying on the strength of the arms. And so he did. Which he regretted, not having time to overcome even a quarter of the way. For some reason, it was at the most inopportune moment that fatigue swept over him in a merciless wave and persistently continued to drain his strength. He tried to gently rest his feet on the window, but when he heard a suspicious crunch, he immediately decided to give up the idea, and somehow controlling himself, he began to move his hands to the right. It seemed strange to him, for such obstacles had almost never been so difficult for him. But it was impossible to argue with his own body – it was always right, even if it was completely inappropriate. With great difficulty, the Prince finally reached the edge of the ledge on the wall and jumped down. Apparently, the idea of a calm transition along the two stairs connecting the balconies was not even going to come to his mind, because he was going to climb the ledge again, but with a new goal and in a slightly different way. The prince saw just above him a small recess in the wall, large enough to hook his hand onto it. After standing a little longer, he shook both hands several times, trying to throw off the shackles of fatigue, and ran up the wall again, still pushing off the railing and throwing both hands as high as possible. And he succeeded again. Now his goal was this very notch, which

was located exactly above his head. Gathering his strength and preparing his right arm, he leaned down with his whole body, and then, pushing off with his legs and left hand, made a sharp jerk up and threw his right so that it caught on the recess. Ready! The prince held on to her confidently. Now, leaning closer to the wall, and gathering what he could muster, he tried to pull himself up to throw his right leg over the narrow stone ledge. Quite dangerous, because he could easily slide down and hit his back or head. But everything went well, and the Prince managed to put both his right and left legs on the ledge the first time. And so, firmly on his feet, he pressed himself close to the wall, spread his arms as if he were trying to wrap his arms around it, and walked to the other side. Quite slow, but still much faster compared to the previous method. Finally reaching another balcony, without experiencing any particular difficulties along the way, the Prince began to descend from the unreliable support. But even more weakness awoke in his arms, and when he felt it, he decided to just jump off. Having done this with enviable ease, he, without hesitation, rushed into the arch through which the stranger had disappeared. His legs obeyed him, and this made him feel even more confident. Behind the curtain was a long corridor with many doors. Fragments of walls were scattered everywhere - in some there were huge holes and gaps that opened up additional rooms and small halls, to which this corridor did not originally lead. Not knowing where to run, the Prince decided to move forward, not turning anywhere and not looking around. And immediately he had to part with this intention - he heard a frightened human scream, it seemed to be a woman's, and stopped abruptly. The scream was incredibly loud, full not even of horror, but of something even more terrible, and resounded throughout the corridor, lost in it. To the Prince's left was a medium-sized elongated room with a bed in the center, the entrance to which was now a large, almost human-sized hole in the wall, made at the level of his chest. Bending his head, the Prince did not hesitate to climb the wall, and, jumping down to the other side, tried to immediately assess the situation. In front of him, opposite each other, stood a young blonde girl and a sand monster, short but particularly ugly. The latter twisted a weighty metal chain in his hands and looked predatorily at the girl, who was almost mad with fear. She looked like an ordinary concubine. When the Prince took a few steps, both of them took notice of him. But if the monster stared at the Prince for a long time, then the concubine, seeing him and taking advantage of the fact that he distracted the monster, rushed away, leaving the room through an ordinary door that was located at the other end of the room.

Fortunately, the monster was alone here, and the Prince decided that it would not be difficult for him to cope with it. He drew a dagger

from behind his back and drew his sword, then immediately rushed towards the monster and tried to strike it with the long blade as hard as possible in order to deprive him of the hand that was squeezing his only means of defense. But before the sword could reach its target, the monster swung its chain and yanked it from the Prince's hand in one sharp motion. And then he swung again, this time wrapping his arm around him. And the Prince immediately felt the piercing terrible cold that permeated the chain. And this cold crept into him, burning him, and the chain seemed to wrap around him even more tightly, and because of the cold, it seemed to stick to his skin, causing wild pain. Screaming loudly, the Prince jerked his hand towards him, trying to free it. And he managed to do it the first time, but he had to pay a price - the chain, which did not want to let him go so easily, fell behind his hand along with pieces of skin, which instantly formed several oblong wounds on it, which immediately began to bleed terribly. After that, the Prince literally went berserk. Screaming even louder, he struck the enemy in a jump with both feet at once, falling on his back and throwing his opponent a fair distance. And immediately jumping to his feet, the Prince ran away and in a jump planted a dagger straight into the chest of the still lying monster. However, in the end, before disappearing into thin air, he managed to whip the Prince on the back with his chain, which made him press even harder on the dagger, digging it into the monster's body like a tooth. A second passed, and this chain was the only thing that reminded of the recent existence of a monster that had broken up into thousands of tiny grains of sand, some of which had been swallowed by the dagger, and some of which had been swallowed by the sand that had permeated the air.

Still full of rage, the Prince sprang to his feet, ran to his sword, grabbed it, and looked around. Nobody. The flow of incredible force abruptly subsided, he felt a strong burning sensation in his hand. He looked at her and found that fortunately, despite the multiple wounds, the blood wasn't flowing that much. And again, insane fatigue spread through his body, confusing his thoughts, clouding and destroying them. The prince did not want to run after the frightened concubine, and he had already missed the Indian captive, and now he had again lost the thread that somehow connected him and what he sought. And he wanted to put an end to this nightmare that he had spread his arms over the city and squeezed all the juice out of it, just as fatigue was doing to him now. The constant surges of strength and mood, which were apparently caused by the Sands, pretty much exhausted him.

The prince decided to return back to the throne room. It was there that it all began, perhaps there was also some clue to the puzzle. He walked over to the wall and began to climb it, which

should have been easier now, because there was a large broken stone on this side, but the Prince's strength was leaving him even faster than the drops of blood dripped from his fingers. Therefore, this obstacle caused him a lot of trouble before he finally more or less confidently stood with both feet on it. And then he staggered from surprise, almost falling backwards. In the corridor, a dozen paces from the Prince, closer to the opposite wall, stood the same stranger in red robes and looked at the Prince. It was evident from the face of the Indian captive that she herself was not quite ready for such an encounter, for she stood completely motionless, with both hands down and making no attempt to escape. Barely able to stay on his feet, the Prince slowly moved forward. And he was already preparing to jump down slowly, so as not to frighten a casual acquaintance who could make at least some sense in all his further actions or even, perhaps, tell him something about what was happening. But then the most stupid and unnecessary thing that could happen happened: the Prince was standing almost on the very edge, and one of the stones, just the one on which his right leg rested, broke off and fell to the floor. And the Prince lost his support and flew down. Hitting his back against the rocks, he cried out in pain and desperately waved his arms, trying to cling to something. But he did not succeed, and on top of that, hitting the back of his head, he rolled unconscious to the floor, hitting his head again, this time with his forehead, and slicing it against a small stone splinter, after which he was left lying completely motionless.

He did not dream or see anything, he just lay for about an hour in a completely unconscious state. During this time, the fatigue that had enmeshed him loosened its grip a little, and when he woke up, he felt rested and regained. The first thing he saw when he got to his feet and, shaking his head from side to side, opened his clumped eyelids, was the gaze of a pair of black eyes fixed on him: an Indian prisoner was standing a few steps away from him. She held a small bow in front of her with both hands, and several arrows could be seen from behind her. But she did not hold the bow ready, but in her hands down, showing her trust.

The prince, of course, did not notice this immediately and, not feeling the hilt of the dagger in its usual place, pulled his sword from its sheath - it was with him - and stared at the stranger with a threatening look. She stepped back, raised her bow and reached for the arrow. At that moment, the Prince saw on his arm, which was touched by the chain, several neat bandages made from his own sleeve. And only then was he able to truly appreciate what was happening and immediately stepped back, saying quietly:

-Sorry.

The bandages were really good: they perfectly restrained bleeding and did not cause much inconvenience. His palm was completely clean, not smeared with blood - the former prisoner, apparently, took care of this too! The back of his head hurt, and the Prince touched it with his hand, and then looked carefully at the tips of his fingers - no blood. It means that he was lucky and only hit himself without cutting himself. There was some discomfort when moving his back, but it was not at all insignificant, and the Prince instantly forgot about it. He ran his hand over his face from his chin upwards and pushed his sweaty hair from his forehead.

Touching it, the Prince felt a deep scratch, but it also did not bleed or hurt, but it did not disappear like a wound on his hand.

"What happened?" The Prince was the first to speak. His tone was a little rough and demanding, but he didn't embarrass the girl at all.

"You fell and lost consciousness. I washed and bandaged your wounds.

The prince hardly understood her words - he did not know the Indian she spoke very well, and, catching only the words "you" and "wounds", he asked:

-A what?

The girl seemed to understand him much better and tried to say her words in Persian:

"I washed and bandaged your wounds.

At these words, she made several movements as if she were wrapping an invisible piece of cloth around her hand, while mixing words from her native language into her speech.

Now the picture has become clearer. The prince, of course, had time to understand without her words that it was she who bandaged his arm and stopped the bleeding (after all, if not her, then who else?), but now he was once again convinced of this.

"Thank you," he said. "But where did you put the dagger?" The Prince's tone changed to suspicious. After all, they were not friends, quite the opposite, at least until recently.

"What? I wanted to ask you: where *did you* put him?" the girl was indignant. "Without him, we are doomed!

"He was with me all this time, I remember it clearly. It feels like I dropped it quite recently, somewhere nearby," the Prince replied somewhat absently. And he thought to himself: "She would bother with me if I had a dagger. She would have pulled it out, and ran away. And that's it! From now on, I trust only myself!"

"Maybe we should look for it?" Otherwise, everything is lost... - the former prisoner said either with reproach or with sadness.

"Do you know anything about this dagger?" Or about the Sands? Why do you say that? The Prince asked with interest.

"Since I was a child, my father told me that inside this Hourglass there is a terrible beast that destroys everything around. That the most terrible things will begin to happen if someone opens the Sands of Time. I've always known that the dagger is the key to the Sands. I tried to stop you, but everything happened so unexpectedly and rapidly that nothing could be done," the girl said.

"Everything you've told me is not news to me. The question is different - can this be corrected somehow? The Prince answered impatiently. "Just don't start saying something like 'give me the dagger!' I'll do it myself, but maybe you can help me?"

"I'm already helping you. And I'll tell you everything I know or can remember," the stranger answered as calmly as possible. She tried to remove all resentment and irritation from her voice.

"Speak," the Prince said expectantly.

"Any key can not only unlock, but also lock. And any animal can be driven back into the cage. I don't know exactly how this can be done: my father carefully guarded the secrets of the dagger and the Clock - he knew much more about them from somewhere than the others. What is important now is that until the dagger falls into the vizier's hands, it is weak, it can be dealt with, it is not omnipotent. But if the dagger falls on him, then no one will be saved," the girl said gloomily. "I know you don't trust me. You think I want revenge. Yes, there's a storm boiling inside me. It's your fault for everything that has happened in the last few days, but it doesn't matter now. We are in the midst of a storm, the most formidable and ruthless. And we need to endure.

"It's all so complicated. Your treacherous vizier has deceived me. I saw my father turn into Sand! And then... It was no longer him.

-I am so sorry. I know what it is like to lose a father. That's why I don't want revenge. You have already received in full. Do not wait for my forgiveness, but see me as an ally.

Throwing off his incredulous expression, the Prince, with the greatest kindness and gratitude in his voice that he was now capable of, said for some reason in Indian:

-Thank you!

A timid smile slipped across the girl's face, breaking through the wall of distrust and misunderstanding between them. And the problem with languages was completely trivial and instantly ceased to bother both of them. The most important thing was that they were just people, not monsters. But, only forgetting about the problem, it was impossible to solve it, so the former prisoner began with the simplest. Bringing her index finger to her chest, she said:

-Headlight. My name is Farah. I am an Indian princess, the daughter of the great Maharajah.

The Prince understood these words easily and immediately, and without hesitation, he answered:

"And me...

And then he felt a sharp dryness in his throat: he was tormented by great thirst, and he was unable to speak. Fortunately, his eyes immediately fell on a jug that stood a few steps away from him - apparently Farah brought water in it, with which she washed the Prince's wounds. And he rushed to him, tipping a stream of water into his parched throat, which, flowing from a wide neck, poured not only into the Prince's mouth, but also dripped down his cheeks and chin, dripping on his clothes and the floor. Taking greedy sips, the Prince noted to himself some special taste of water. Perhaps he seemed so because he was so thirsty. But he didn't think so himself, because when drops of this water flowed behind his clothes and fell on his skin, he also felt something special. It was as if he felt this taste in his body. Although at the same time he knew perfectly well that there was nothing like that in this water - it, like ordinary water, did not have a pronounced taste that food had, but still these drops somehow had a special effect on his thoughts. They, still frantically rushing in his head, gradually slowed down and cleared, the unnecessary ones left, and a more or less clear realization of what was happening came. Perhaps it was even too abrupt, because the Prince immediately remembered his father's death, the horror that had permeated him and everything around him a few hours ago.

But, on the other hand, he had a clear idea of the situation and did not run after illusions. He held the truth in his hands. It was painful, but it was true and was not going to crumble before our eyes. And he must go with this truth from beginning to end, whatever it may be. Now the Prince saw this truth at least in the fact that his forehead and hand hurt, even if they were carefully treated. But Farah was a Human, not a Sand, and could not heal instantly. The question was, could the latter really heal and heal? Hidden pain does not cease to exist and it is not known how it will turn out. And now everything was quite obvious. Seeing your wounds, you can watch how they heal. Albeit slowly, but surely. For real.

Such thoughts swirled in the Prince's head as he followed Farah back to the hall with balconies. And he gradually realized that he was not so mistaken in his recent choice. The only thing he didn't understand was why the dagger couldn't show him the truth about his fleeting, but, as it turned out, important memory. But then it did not occur to him that the dagger could do this on purpose.

Anyway, there was a real living person walking beside him now, and his presence made the Prince feel much better. But at the same time, he was beginning to feel guilty before Farah. He remembered the inordinate sadness in her eyes that he had accidentally noticed a

few days ago in the desert. Now, catching a few of her casual glances – she turned around occasionally, as if worried about him and that he might get worse – he could not catch any sadness. Either she hid it too well, or his presence was just as pleasant to her and extinguished this sorrow. He never told her his name, at first he couldn't because of his parched throat, and then he decided it wasn't that important. He wanted to be silent. Although he didn't even suspect how much he could tell her now.

Going out onto the balcony and approaching the edge, they stopped and looked down. During their absence, the desert picture did not change at all, and to an unknowing person, it might seem that everything was normal.

"Dagger!" – flashed through the Prince's head.

"Wait, we need to find the dagger. I think I know where he is," the Prince said, running back into the hallway. And then, from behind the long curtains, he shouted to Fare: "I dropped it when I fell from the ledge. I'll look for it now." Farah did not follow him, waiting to see how the search would end. In her mind, she thought something about how carelessly the Prince was handling such an important thing, but the thought did not occupy her for long.

Less than a couple of minutes later, the Prince came out of the corridor, clutching a dagger in his hands. Farah's eyes widened a little wider, and her hand twitched involuntarily. The prince noticed this and said:

"Remember our agreement.

Farah remained silent in response, following the Prince to the railing.

Looking somewhere in the distance, at the opposite side of the hall, the Prince thought: "Let him consider me a muddle and a narrow-minded fool. I can't trust her yet. Let's see what happens next." And aloud he only said:

-Palace... He's beautiful, isn't he?

- Yes, but is it so important now? We need to hurry! We need to find the Watch! Farah replied with slight irritation.

"She also commands me! Yes, of course, I owe her - she almost saved my life. But for some girl to command me? No, perhaps the role of a fool is not suitable, we need to show her who is in charge here!" thought the Prince, saying aloud only:

"Wait a minute, I need to come to my senses.

Then the Prince turned away from the railing and rested his back on it, all below reminding him too vividly of his own horror and pain. Out of the corner of his eye, he continued to stare at Farah. And she decided to talk again, changing the subject:

"It was terrible... When you released the Sands, I felt a great heat and it became very difficult to breathe.

For some reason, the prince expected a special emphasis on the word "you", but Farah pronounced it on a par with the others. The prince liked the way Farah softened her tone at his request. Perhaps there are other ways to influence it, he thought.

"On the contrary, I remember the wild cold," replied the Prince.

"Strange," Farah drawled vaguely.

"Yes, it's strange. Don't you think that everything is strange now? What happened is strange. The fact that we were alive at all, that we had not become one of these terrible creatures, the Prince seemed to be about to break down.

"That's why I ran away from you. I was afraid you were one of them. Tell me, isn't it so?" Farah asked excitedly. She knew that the Prince was not a monster, but she asked him this question anyway.

-No... No! The Prince exclaimed.

-Ok. That's nice! But—" Farah answered in a calm but sad voice.

-But what? The Prince asked.

-I do not know. I don't know what to do! How will this nightmare end? If it ends at all," Farah said with despair in her voice. "No matter how bravely you fight, Sand... He will devour, devour everything!

And as if to confirm her words, the walls shook slightly, and somewhere in the distance there was a rumble, probably from the fact that another block of stone had broken off and fallen. The palace continued to experience the pressure of the elements and collapsed.

"But I think I know what to do," and then the Prince began his story about what he had recently seen and experienced, trying not to miss any details. He had already seen how an accidental fragment clinging to his memory could make a difference. He told me about the dagger, about how it can immerse you in the past, in forgotten memories, and even someone else's. About the fact that he almost does not remember the period of time immediately after the discovery of Peski. He knew for sure that an hour or two had passed since then, but he did not remember them in detail at all.

"As if someone took away an hour of life!" Absolutely nothing, just terrible cold! said the Prince.

Even his dream seemed clearer to him. There he remembered some white eyes... Spots... Orange... Yes, orange clouds or smoke - he remembered one more detail. And somewhere deep inside him, he felt that his strange forgotten dream was connected to this lost watch. In some incredible way, everything was now connected, entwined with thin threads that united together something that, it would seem, could not exist at the same time and so closely.

Then the Prince spoke of what he remembered, of what he had seen when he had entered first this hall and then the throne room, where the Clock had once stood, of the vizier's convincing lies and

their wordless confrontation. By the time he came to the story of the huge birds, Farah's face had already settled with incredible surprise. She listened fascinated, trying at the same time not to miss a word and to imagine everything that was happening to the Prince, in his own words. Several times she glanced for a long time at the huge window broken by birds, with difficulty tearing it away from the Prince's eyes. Sometimes it seemed to her that it was not he who was speaking, but his eyes, and he himself was silent and could not speak at all. She saw something special in those eyes, something imperceptible from the outside, unless she stared at them for hours. Something that the Prince felt in the taste of water from a jug. They were blue and for some reason resembled the sky. A sky free of everything, a sky that has become home to the wind, bringing only fresh air, without a single grain of sand to poison this freshness.

"Stick to me and I can protect you." You can't stand alone, and if anything happens, the dagger will help us. Yes, this is a weapon of the enemy, but now we can use it against him," the Prince said. "As for the Clock, the vizier took it to the very top of the Tower of Dawn. It is the tallest tower in the city. My father told me that the Sultan's treasury was located there. Surely this is the most impregnable place in all of Azad! But we have no choice, and we need to go there.

"The Tower of Dawn?" But how do you know? Farah asked, surprised.

"I'm just... I know," the Prince said a little smugly.

Without saying anything, Farah gave the Prince a slightly angry and even suspicious look, which he did not notice: at that moment he turned away. The girl felt irritated. On the one hand, he told her everything, but on the other hand, he behaved somewhat impudently and stupidly. And he didn't even say something. In addition, he was in the forefront of those who attacked her city, the palace. Those who killed her father. He was the one who discovered the Sands and, condemning everyone to certain death, released the nightmare from imprisonment. It is simply impossible to imagine a worse ally! But something made these thoughts not even approach her head. As if it was not him at all, but someone in his body who had committed all this horror. And the real one sits in these eyes. And each of his words, slightly flying out of his mouth, was overgrown with a million other words, making the picture unimaginably motley. Although in fact, the Prince, despite all his efforts, spoke rather sparingly and a little incomprehensible. But she understood him. She did not notice that he spoke Persian and some of his words were unknown to her. There was a connection between them, incomprehensible, unlike the one between the vizier and the Prince's thoughts, which flowed through the Sands and could only exist with them. And this one

seemed to have existed forever and was completely different, maybe a little weaker, but special in its own way.

When the Prince came to the story of the vizier's disappearance, Farah began to forget a little, captivated by her thoughts. Sadness mixed with pain rolled up to her. The pain of loss that haunted her forever. It seemed that even if everything was suddenly returned to its place at once, at a time when her father was alive and the city was not attacked by the Persian army, she would not be able to forget. A heart that lives with constant unquenchable pain will never be able to accomplish what it is called to do.

-Headlight!

-Yes?

"Are you listening to me?"

-Yes...

The prince had already noticed a few minutes ago that Farah was looking through him, and it was clear from her eyes that she did not perceive all of his words. Therefore, he tried to bring her back to reality by calling out to her, softening his voice as much as possible. It really worked.

"Where did you stop?" She asked apologetically.

"A large golden-white cloud, it seems to be from the Sand," the Prince replied.

Farah seemed to remember every word he said, though she didn't hear half of them. The connection between them was really real: she seemed to feel everything he said to her. I didn't read his thoughts, I just felt it.

"And what's next?" she asked.

"I don't know. Or rather, I don't remember," the Prince said absently.

-Again? Farah asked in surprise and with a grin. "I think you hit your head too hard!"

Holding back his discontent, the Prince continued, telling Farah something more important to him:

"I think I had a dream, but I can't remember what was in it!" Some incomprehensible scraps and that's it," the Prince said, and it was clear from his face that he was thinking about something.

"Is it so important?" In my opinion, there are more real problems! Farah said.

"I'm sorry, what?" The prince was distracted and looked in the other direction, and not into her eyes, as he had done before, and therefore did not understand her words.

"Is your dream so important?" Farah repeated, realizing what was going on.

"How can I say if I don't know what was in it?" The Prince replied, a little surprised.

"You misunderstood: do you really want to know what was in it?" The girl specified.

-Yes. For some reason, it seems to me—" The prince paused, thought of something, looked up, as if trying to examine his forehead, and continued, "that there was something in this dream that I must have seen. I don't know why, but this thought does not leave me.

"Maybe it really is. But—" Farah began to answer, but the Prince cut her off in mid-sentence.

"I haven't told you anything else. After the birds flew through the window and then the vizier disappeared, I accidentally fell down on the balcony and injured my hand. Or rather, I had wounded her before, with my sword, and then, when I fell, I scratched both hands on the glass. But," the Prince pointedly put both palms forward, showing them to Farah, "when I woke up, I didn't find a single wound!

"It's just incredible!" Now I understand! Farah said in surprise, knowing that every word the Prince said was true. "I'd like to know if something like that happened to me, too!"

"But I don't remember anything. Almost nothing," the Prince said and looked at Farah. Or rather, he was already looking at her, and now he seemed to look inside her. Not just a look into the eyes, but a look into the soul. Now he was able to see the neatly hidden particles of great sadness in the corners of her black eyes. Yes, she was in pain. The feeling of emptiness in her chest had only intensified over the past few days, but she tried not to show it. What lived inside her soul seemed to shield her from the Sands, being an insurmountable shield for them.

"And after all this, I went back to this hall and saw you. Well, then you know better than me! The Prince finished his story.

He didn't tell her about the strange scrap of memory, which contained only a small patch of something red, which turned out to be her dress. She won't understand. He won't understand, because he won't be able to explain it intelligibly.

"Yes," Farah said back, and then the Prince saw her want to say something but didn't, and the words died on the other side of her lips.

-A what? The Prince asked, hoping to hear these words.

-A what? Farah's voice sounded surprised.

"You wanted to say something. I thought so," the Prince explained.

-I... No. Or rather, I don't know," Farah said slowly, as if giving away every word with regret.

There was a pause. Each looked into the other's eyes, but looked as if he was trying to hide from this very gaze. The prince tried to understand how he should treat Farah: she either made him angry, impudent, or on the contrary, showed friendliness. And she did not

ingratiate herself with him, like a vizier, and therefore seemed more honest.

"So?" The Prince was the first to break the silence.

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry..." Farah fell too deep into silence and even forgot a little, after which she spoke confused and excited. "I can't get rid of the memories. Only a few hours have passed, and it seems to me that I have been living in this hell all my life. And best of all I remember its beginning: heat, unbearable, stifling. I was very scared then. Everything was happening so fast..."

The prince stood with his hand on the marble railing, and it seemed that if he had a little more strength, he would have crushed them so much that he crumbled them into dust. Anger was mixed in him with a sense of guilt. Anger at the vizier who pushed him to open this ill-fated Clock. Perhaps he felt less guilty about what happened than he should have. For the time being, he found justification in his anger. Someone else is to blame, not him. But outwardly he behaved calmly and did not show it.

I ran to the nearest door. I... To me... I didn't know where to get away from this heat. He didn't even let me stop and catch my breath, even for a minute, but instead drove me somewhere. I ran along some corridors for a long time, from one to another, and nowhere did I feel better. I was looking for some balcony, window or exit from the palace. But if I ran past them, I probably didn't notice.

Farah's story was confused, it was clear from her that she seemed to be reliving all the events. Sometimes she stopped to catch her breath and collect her thoughts.

She had never run like that. She did not understand where so much strength and agility came from in her legs. Something was driving her forward, away from terror. Towards horror. As she took one step at a time, she felt that she was running as if on coals or on red-hot iron. And it wasn't from an overabundance of fear gnawing at her from the inside—it was real. This heat was not like that emitted by the desert sun. It was a hundred times stronger and burned not only from the outside, but also from the inside, squeezing even the heart.

She did not notice, but tears rolled one after another from her eyes and ran down her cheeks in a stream. Sometimes it seemed to her that the air was becoming a little fresher, not so stifling, but after a few seconds the heat returned with greater force, as if someone was throwing coals into an invisible furnace, which made the air so hot. And it rolled in new waves over her body, over her soul. It

seemed to her that she heard some screams, but not from the side, but inside herself.

Once she turned into the wrong corridor and after a few steps ran into a wall. There was no way out of here, except for turning back. But such a simple idea did not consider it necessary to visit her head. Headlight stopped at the very wall, almost flying into it at full speed. And if she hadn't noticed her, she probably would have rammed her and run on, as if nothing had happened - so much desire to run and live in her.

She turned around. She was breathing heavily. She didn't want to breathe through her mouth anymore - she had already burned her throat. But she didn't want to drink either, and it wouldn't help. The sensation was not like thirst. It was unlike anything at all. Special. But this is not at all pleasant. Resting her back against the wall and putting both hands on it, she tried to figure something out, at least, for example, where to run next. And what to do. And is there anything you can do about it at all... hereby... She didn't have the right word to describe what was happening. And if she had a thousand of the most powerful words at her disposal, they would not be able to express everything she felt. Her sense of this reality. A new one, insanely nasty, cruel and completely senseless, but, unfortunately, the one from which you cannot escape or run away. It's everywhere. Both outside and inside it. And even on the border between it and the rest of the world. And it was impossible to scratch out the way out, even if it was spent on this hundred years. There was no wall that could be scratched, so it was impossible. You can't get out of what's everywhere.

The best thing she could do was to run back and then turn into another corridor: maybe luck would smile on her there? And she ran, no longer thinking, especially since standing still turned out to be even more terrible than running. I took off even faster than before, but ran very short. Much less than I expected.

Running out of a small lapel in a long corridor, she collided head-on with someone at full speed and, letting out a short scream full of annoyance and pain - after all, it is not very pleasant to crash into someone or something like this, and even with her head - fell to the floor. At the same time as her scream, a second one was heard. It also belonged to a girl who fell to the floor in the same way, but, fortunately, successfully, without hitting anything.

Farah's first and quite natural reaction was that she tried to jump up and run away. She could hardly realize what she was doing, and so her thoughts were rather hazy, and she could no longer distinguish black from white, cold from hot. She could not distinguish anything at all. Everything around her was intertwined into a single lump of pain that stuck in her throat and almost did not allow her to

breathe. Therefore, even when she somehow came to her senses, a grunt escaped from her mouth, stifled by a cough, and so strained that it seemed that she was about to tear her soul out of her own body with it.

The reaction of the second girl was quite similar, but she almost immediately managed to squeeze out something more articulate and intelligible:

"Who are you?" She said abruptly, defiantly, and hopefully at the same time.

"Khu-khoo!" Farah said.

"Who are you?!" The stranger shouted demandingly.

Her behavior was quite understandable - she was also afraid. Despair and fear can give you a lot of strength and make you do strange and sometimes incredible, almost impossible things.

"I... cough... me... I'm Farah," the Indian woman finally controlled herself.

"Are you a human?!" The stranger asked in almost the same demanding tone, but already quieter.

Farah was confused by such a question, although she roughly understood what it meant. She looked at her hands one by one, then for some reason looked at her knees and said:

- Well, of course yes...

And having said this, she looked her new acquaintance in the eyes. Ordinary brown eyes. Human. The same as her own, with the difference that her eyes were almost black. And she, seeing this human look, immediately calmed down - it instantly became clear from her voice.

"Yes, I see," she said.

Only then did Farah notice a strange thing: she understood perfectly well what the stranger was saying. Just because she spoke her native language, and she took these words quite easily without hesitation.

And the stranger continued:

"I'm sorry, it's just..."

-I understand! Farah answered.

"Yes, I've bumped into these creatures twice," the second girl said, and it was obvious that at the word "creatures" she shuddered.

-What? Farah, without understanding why, asked such a strange question.

-How? Haven't you seen those horrible yellow eyes?! These mutilated bodies, these..." the girl asked in surprise, her eyes wide and not even finishing the last words.

"I saw it," Farah said, still surprised by herself and looking somewhere to the side.

And indeed, the figure of a terrible monster with two bright yellow lights on its face, resembling eyes only in shape, abruptly resurfaced in her memory. It seemed that he did not see with these eyes, but simply exuded Sand, which seemed to feel everything around him. And this terrible sight made her run even faster. To her luck and surprise, the monster did not rush after her. Or maybe she was just running too fast?

Only now did Farah begin to realize that the heat increased unbearably when she was in the vicinity of the monster, and faded a little when no one was around. What is this? The action of the Sand or something inside the monsters themselves? Could it be their torn souls that once belonged to humans?

"Then why do you ask?" The stranger turned to Farah inquiringly, interrupting her thoughts.

"It's just that I... I don't quite understand what's going on! My thoughts are confused, I am scared and terribly hot! Farah blurted out, and in the last words you could feel how panic seized her. And she herself felt that she wanted to jump up again and run again.

That's exactly what she did, but it wasn't until she took a couple of steps that she heard behind her:

-Wait!

And Farah stopped. From surprise. From the commanding tone. From the fact that she realized what a stupid thing she was doing - she, having barely found at least one normal living person, moreover, who spoke her native language (which means that she was also one of the prisoners and wanted to escape no less than Farah), and for some reason she was going to leave her.

During these reflections, the stranger got up from the floor, rubbing her forehead, and approached Farah.

-Where are you going? Her voice had lost all its assertiveness and now sounded frightened - she didn't really want to let go, perhaps, of the only living person in this castle besides her.

"It's just hard for me to breathe. And you want to run somewhere. But I don't know where exactly," Farah replied and buried her eyes in the floor, still breathing heavily.

"We'd better go together!" Maybe we can find a place where it will be easier for you," the stranger said.

And they went. Or rather, they ran - Farah could not do otherwise.

Soon they reached a place that Farah had not yet visited in the last hour or two, and she could hardly imagine how much time had passed since that fateful second.

"What are you thinking about all the time and why are you silent?" The stranger's voice snapped Farah out of her reverie again.

"Have you been *there*?" said Farah, emphasizing the last word.

"In the hall? When *did he* open the Hourglass?" the second girl replied, her eyes lit up with rage at the word "he."

"Yes," Farah said.

- Yes, there was. And," the stranger dreamily thrust out one hand forward, her fingers bent forcefully, as if trying to grasp the air, "if I caught him, I would strangle him with my own hands!"

"I don't think it will change anything," Farah replied. Her thoughts were beginning to line up, and she didn't like the aggression with which her newly-found acquaintance spoke about the Prince. Yes, she herself was immensely angry with him, but now his death would not help the cause in any way. And Farah added:

-What for?

-What for?! Are you still asking? You've been there too! Isn't that right?! And I saw everything myself! And after that, you still ask?! If not for him...! The stranger replied with a cry full of the same rage, for some reason stopping at the word "he", and the intonation of her voice still did not bode well for the Prince if he were nearby.

Farah did not answer immediately, although she felt a searching gaze full of indignation that literally poured from the eyes of the stranger. Instead, she looked at the place where they had landed.

And they got into a place like the armory of the palace guard. Along the wall stretched a row of swords sheathed. On the other wall, bows of different sizes were displayed in exactly the same way, first smaller, then larger, and above each of them hung a quiver of arrows with brown and red plumage. A little further in the wall I could see several doors, but from a distance I could see that they were closed.

For some reason, the girls stopped. Farah no longer felt such an overwhelming desire to run. Maybe the fact that this room was especially cool had its effect. Farah even noticed how goosebumps ran through the hands of the stranger and she involuntarily shuddered. However, this could not discourage her assertiveness, and she turned to Farah again.

"You didn't answer!"

-A what? Oh yes! I..." the princess decided to answer, but could not immediately find the right words.

-A what?! What are you doing? Don't you want this bastard dead?! The second girl almost roared.

Farah looked at her again with incomprehension. And she, apparently, already on the verge of a breakdown, ceased to look like a person. Or rather, her eyes - they were seething with anger and, despite the color, were not much different from the yellow eyes of the sand monster.

-Calm down! I just thought, what if suddenly... - Farah began to answer, but without having time to say what she was thinking, she

interrupted the phrase and shouted sharply, unexpectedly loudly for herself:

-Beware!

A monster ran around the corner from somewhere, followed by a long, translucent yellow plume of Sand that was scattering everywhere.

The stranger, who was standing with her back to him, instantly reacted and jumped to the side. Almost collapsing to the floor from the sharpness of her own jump, she ran to the left wall and managed to draw the bow closest to her. But the monster that immediately rushed after her frightened her, and the arrows she reached out to were soon out of her reach, because she wanted to live longer, and she ran away in the other direction.

-Arrows! Arrows!! she shouted to Farah.

She, immediately assessing the situation, pulled the nearest quiver from the wall, but instead of throwing it to the stranger entirely, she snatched one arrow and carefully threw it to her. And, fortunately, she grabbed it and immediately used it for its intended purpose - she inserted it into the bow, pulled the bowstring and with a furious scream set it free. The arrow hit the sandy eye, and just in time, because the sword, too long for a short monster, almost reached the girl's throat. But the arrow, the tip of which came out of the back of the monster's head, struck him with enough force to throw him back. And, strange as it may seem, this arrow killed him. And while he was falling to the floor, Sand had already managed to tear his body apart and absorbed it to a grain of sand without a trace, and only a long sword and scraps of clothing fell to the floor next to where he stood.

Farah looked at the stranger. In addition to fear and rage at the same time, something else could be read on her face. She had an expression on her face as if a sword had been thrust into her after all. A grimace of pain distorted her face. But usually on such faces you can read an incredible desire to live. And now Farah had never seen anything like it. But not because she did not want to live, but because she did not die! Her soul was dying, but not herself: strange dull yellow streaks ran through her body, sometimes bursting out in the form of bright rays. Only these rays were strange. They did not come from her body, but, on the contrary, poured into it. It seemed to absorb Sand from the air. Gradually, the stranger's eyes lost the remnants of their humanity, her skin took on a strange gray color, and she let out a terrible, piercing scream that made even Farah feel cold. She did not understand what exactly made the girl turn into a monster like this. With a trembling hand, Farah grabbed another bow, put an arrow into it from the same quiver she still held in her hand, and fired. The target was hit almost instantly. The arrow hit the

monster girl in the chest, just above the abdomen, and she died instantly, not having time to take a couple of steps to the frightened Farah. She died almost in the same way as a minute ago the sand soldier who came out of nowhere.

Farah didn't remember the last time she had to shoot a bow. She'd been pretty good at it as a child, but it was a long time ago, about seven or eight years ago. But, apparently, this skill was well preserved in her, and she was able to shoot an arrow almost flawlessly, hitting the originally intended target.

Picking up the quiver from the floor and slung it over her shoulder, Farah wrapped her fingers around the bow so that she dug her nails into her own palm, nearly scratching it until it bled. And, feeling the already familiar, but therefore even more disgusting and burning heat in the air, she ran again. As fast as I could. And something gave her strength again, although she had almost no strength left.

Again, she did not understand the road and chaotically turned to the right, then to the left. And suddenly Farah felt that she was already running down this corridor. This embarrassed her, and she accidentally tripped over a stone on the floor and, after flying some distance, fell to the floor. Fortunately for her, it turned out to be smooth, without accidental fragments and cracks. Therefore, as she fell, she simply hit her knee and dropped the bow from her hand. Still running in her mind, Farah immediately sat up, but when she realized what was going on, she could no longer get up: she felt her strength almost completely leave her trembling body. She could only lean her back against the wall, her knees closer to her, and let out a wild, desperate cry that echoed through the walls of the corridor like an icy echo, making them shudder. As if the walls felt the pain that was digging into the girl's throat.

And Farah began to cry for real. Like a little child. It howled like a wild beast or a strong wind. Tears, full of pain, despair, sadness, resentment and just fear (although it had long since faded in comparison with everything else), flowed down her cheeks, then down her neck and, scratching her throat, were absorbed into her dress. Several times she put both palms to her face, folding them in a wedge, and buried her nose in them, causing drops to run down her fingers, causing them to shudder. Her chin shook feverishly in a sometimes silent scream, which from time to time turned into a real scream or intermittent sobs, as if someone had cut them off from each other. Farah didn't care much about being heard, and right now it was so easy to catch her off guard. What could be worse? The nightmare her father had told her so much about had happened, it was everywhere now, and its grip was getting closer and closer to her throat. Is there any reason to live at all? Maybe in a minute she

would turn into a sand monster like that girl? Why don't these cursed corridors end?

And most of all it hurt that she could not sink into oblivion, even for a second. She lost track of time, but she still felt every second of her hateful meaningless life, from which there was no way out. She felt a ball of saliva form on her lower lip, which she first blew out of her mouth with an exhalation, and then pulled back in with a sigh. A heavy, deep, and intermittent sigh. Sometimes so intermittent that she began to run out of air. Farah felt that she was completely exhausted. She could hardly move her arms or lips. She could no longer scream - her voice, her own voice ceased to obey her! From her throat, plugged by a lump of pain, only a faint, barely audible wheeze came out, which was drowned out by the sounds of a madly beating heart. It didn't just beat. It was tearing her from within. It was tearing, because with each blow a wave of heat ran through her body, slowly killing her. If Farah could, she would command her heart to stop. She didn't know why... Why should she live? Why would she sit here and weep uncontrollably? I didn't know anything. But I felt everything. All the pain of the world seemed to bite into her at once, into her heart with its sharp long claws and wanted to torture her forever.

Once she managed to gather her strength and make a desperate dash, the purpose of which was to get to her feet and run away, but even before she could move her leg, taking the first step, she fell to the floor again, and this time she did not press her back against the wall, but remained lying on her side with bent knees and continued to moisten the floor with salty sadness. At the same time, somewhere in the back of her mind, one thought flickered - why did she perceive everything that had happened so emotionally? She always considered herself restrained and balanced, calm and reasonable. But it was unlike anything else. Everything - her body, mind, and feelings - was out of control. Maybe this is the beginning of the end?

Poor, poor Farah... What she had experienced in just one of those countless seconds could have killed several people at once. The pain that hits from the inside is always stronger than the pain that strikes from the outside.

So she lay for about half an hour. By this time, the tears had stopped rolling down her slightly swollen and reddened cheeks. Farah still wanted to cry, but she couldn't. The pain remained, and the tears ended. Her voice returned, but she just sobbed softly, covering her face with her hands. And although she didn't understand it yet, it was already much easier for her. The fever that constantly tormented her disappeared somewhere. Or she just got used to it. Her eyes became a little clearer. The sadness that poured out of them remained somewhere in the corners of her eyes, turning

into dark spots on the mirror of her soul. The desire to live did not return to her. But there was a desire to quickly get away from the cold and wet stone floor and run somewhere. Or, perhaps, go. Now she has found an explanation for her aspirations. She was driven not by the desire to live, but to survive. Her strength, it seemed to Farah, returned to her almost in an instant. And first she reached for the bow lying next to her, and then, resting both hands on the floor, she stood up and walked slowly down the corridor, barely making a sound.

And the first thought came to her, which added to her confidence: her torment was the price for not turning into one of these monsters. She withstood, withstood these blows. She is a person. This means that she still has hope.

Farah's story took a little time. The prince felt a slight shiver. Still, if not completely, he felt guilty before Farah. And she didn't even tell him about how she sobbed. She didn't want to and couldn't describe it. You could only feel it. But she did not wish anything like this to anyone.

"I don't know how you managed to kill any of the monsters. I managed to do it with a dagger," the Prince decided to speak. "It's as if he sucks all the contents out of them, Sand, and feeds on it.

"A dagger," Farah drawled vaguely.

"Well, yes, a dagger. And what? The prince was embarrassed.

"When I was a child, my father told me a lot about him," Farah explained. "But I never thought he could do so much!" Who and why could create such terrifying but powerful things?

"I see your father liked to tell you stories. But he kept the real secrets even from you. And even more so from everyone else. Oh, and now I understand perfectly well why! It is a pity that the vizier will not be so kind as to reveal to us a couple of secrets that could be very useful! The Prince blurted out sarcastically.

Farah was silent, unable to find what to answer. "Is he having fun?"

After standing silently for a minute, vainly trying to remember something, the Prince said:

-We have to go. Standing here we will not solve anything.

"Where are we going?" To the Tower of Dawn? Farah asked.

- Yes, probably. There," the Prince pointed in the direction of the large window, "on the balcony, I saw the birds with the Clock flying away in the direction of the tower.

"What if it's a trap?" Or deception? A vizier is capable of this," Farah said, for some reason not making a special intonation on the

word "vizier" - she did not even feel hatred for him, although he deserved it in full. Rage did not live in her heart. And, probably, nothing could make her open up to this animal feeling. She was human.

"I know I can! I don't know, maybe it's a deception. But it's better to try than to wait for your death here! The desire to go burned in the Prince stronger and stronger with every second.

"I hope you're right!" Let's go! The girl agreed.

Chapter 14. An old enemy

Asha and Ajit walked along the road, listening with apprehension to every rustle, and trying not to break the ominous silence.

-Where are we going? Asha asked suddenly.

"To the palace, I think," Ajit replied in a whisper, his gaze urging his companion, if not to be silent, then at least to talk in a low voice.

"Do you think she's there?" Asha asked more quietly.

"Well, where else do you think she can be?" I don't think the princess will have a chance to become anything other than an ordinary concubine," Ajit explained rather sharply.

-Hmm... yes, indeed," said Asha, nodding his head thoughtfully.

They continued to walk, gradually approaching the palace, which was already very close. If it were not for the night, they would have noticed that the darkness had thickened and for some reason it had become colder.

A light breeze rustled the leaves of bizarre-shaped bushes, swayed the long, jagged palm leaves. On the sides, at a short distance, low houses could be seen. They were not particularly luxurious, and in the dark they seemed to be particularly squalid and gray. The air was stale, some dust flowed everywhere, which interfered with breathing and gave the air a subtle yellow hue.

"And yet I don't understand!" What's going on here? What were these monsters? What is this strange vision? Questions poured out of Asha one after another.

"I already said - I don't know! Are you back to your own? Ajit replied nervously.

"I just want to understand what we are facing!" Don't you think it's all a little strange? Asha was more insistent this time.

"We're facing a nightmare, if you haven't figured it out yet!" Have you seen these creatures? Ajit replied evasively.

"Of course I did, I wasn't blind!" But I don't understand where they came from? Remember Kashi - the Persians attacked us. Live. Real. Not like monsters. And it is unlikely that they went to visit the monsters! But... but..." - Asha continued to press.

-But what? Ajit asked.

"But where do you see Persian or Bactrian soldiers?" Well, not counting the one that... Crumbled. Where are they? I personally do not see a single one! Oh, maybe they're hiding? Is it on purpose to confuse us? Hey, hey! Come out, we know you're out there! Asha said sarcastically with an evil sneer in his voice.

-Be quiet! Ajit tried to shout at him.

"What's the difference?" Be silent, don't be silent, they hear us! Our thoughts. Well, remember that he came to us when we were in

the bushes. Tell me, how could he see or hear us?! And at night? Nohow! He just hears what we think, and that's it. Both he and his friends! Asha was in earnest.

-Calm down! I don't know any more than you do! Maybe all this has something to do with that pillar of light? Ajit said, barely restraining himself from screaming.

-Can! Or maybe not. And this vision... Do you think it's gone? Or is he sitting behind that bush over there," Asha stretched out his hand and pointed to the opposite side of the road, "and watching us?"

"So what if he watches?" Can you change something? I doubt it," Ajit replied in a calmer tone.

This calmness was somehow incomprehensibly transmitted to Asha, because he, opening his mouth for another sharp phrase, suddenly fell silent and looked away. He tried to find answers to his questions in the whole picture around him. At least for some of his questions, of which he has accumulated an immeasurable number over the past half hour.

He walked and talked to himself in his mind, or rather, asked questions:

"What's going on? Why does he not want to say anything so much? Where is the princess now? What's wrong with her?"

"Do you think she's still alive?" The last question burst out of Asha.

"How do I know?" I hope so. If there was nothing to hope for, we wouldn't have gotten here," Ajit replied.

"I hope so, too," Asha said in a barely audible voice.

Coming closer and closer to the palace, they stopped looking around and directed their eyes to the huge building, which, even being lost in the darkness of the night, amazed with its majesty, extraordinary beauty and incredible size. The top of the palace consisted of many towers, the main of which was simply huge, and at the base there was a large stone balcony that could easily accommodate at least a hundred people. But the palace grew not only upward, but also wider, growing into walls similar to those that surrounded the city, and then exploding with new towers, smaller, but just as beautiful and fascinating. In addition, the palace was hung with green banners, which made it seem like a real oasis in the middle of the desert.

From all this magnificence, extraordinary majesty and grace, imprisoned in stone, both travelers stopped to take a better look. They knew they should be in a hurry, but for a while, neither Asha nor Ajit could bring themselves to move, as if they had been taken prisoner by an invisible person.

"Let's get closer!" Asha was the first to break free from the mysterious fetters.

They moved towards the main door, which was also of incredible size, three or four times the height of a man.

"Have you noticed...?" Asha began to ask a question and stopped in mid-sentence.

"Did you notice what?" Ajit asked uncomprehendingly.

-Air. Stuffy, dusty. Even nasty! It's hard to breathe! Cough! Asha explained, coughing defiantly.

-Think so... Naturally! Ajit replied in a completely indifferent tone that the interlocutor did not like.

"Of course?" Asha asked excitedly, as if trying to catch his companion.

"I wish I hadn't noticed!" Ajit said in the same indifferent and calm voice. He didn't want to get involved in another verbal altercation, so he threw a stern and confident look at Asha and forced him to stop the interrogation.

"I won't leave it like this!" - Asha said to himself with annoyance.

Approaching the palace, they stepped on the long but low steps that preceded the entrance. There was silence all around, but there was something ominous about it that made both warriors be on their guard and instinctively remain silent so as not to attract unnecessary attention. The silence was broken only by the occasional rumble of the vaults of the palace. It seemed that somewhere in the distance the building was collapsing.

An unpleasant surprise awaited them at the door: it was locked.

"What are we going to do?" Asha asked.

"Well, I don't think it's worth knocking!" They will not open. Or one of the... these," Ajit tried to chuckle, making his voice as low as possible, but there was too much seriousness and apprehension in his tone, which made Asha not even think of smiling, but only silently nodded his head.

They stood indecisively for a few minutes, as if waiting for someone's prompting, and then went back down the steps.

"We need to look for another way," Asha suggested. This time he took the initiative and went first. His trial path went to the right of the palace, bypassing. Ajit, not answering anything, but inwardly agreeing with his companion, moved after him.

As they walked along the wall that began next to the entrance, close to it, it always seemed to Asha that his companion was walking too slowly, and he was clearly annoyed by this:

"Let's go quickly!" Every second counts! Come on, don't hesitate! The young Indian expressed his dissatisfaction. And he was right! Every second could be fatal. And this mistake could forever remain on their conscience.

"Stop rushing me!" Ajit replied dissatisfied, and then added almost in a whisper: "You'll have time to die..."

And he immediately regretted his words: Asha heard them perfectly and instantly turned to him with a look full of curiosity. But Ajit was not going to give up: he was annoyed by the audacity with which this young man tried to command him. But Asha did not seem to notice all this. Now he began to annoy Ajit with questions:

"What did you mean?!" Asha's tone was really defiant, contained some kind of challenge. Anyone might not like it.

-Cut it out. You'd better stop," Ajit replied in a voice muffled with indignation.

"What else?!" And? The young Indian was already in earnest.

"Nothing!" Ajit almost shouted, forgetting all caution. "I'll just leave!" If you like to play a hero, you are welcome! As much as you want, but without me! Who would like such audacity?! I don't really need your orders! Fool!

While Ajit was saying all this, Asha was accumulating a whole pile of sharp phrases in himself to pour them out on his companion at once as soon as he finished. But Ajit's last word seemed to knock the desire to speak out of him, and he just opened his mouth without dropping a sound.

Ajit looked at Asha, who was still standing there, not moving or saying anything, and continued:

"Do as you like. You'll only cause trouble. Adieu!

And without a moment's hesitation, he turned and walked away. He tried to show as much indifference as possible and even quickened his pace.

"Oh, please!" I can handle it myself! Asha blurted out, excited.

And without saying another word, he walked in the opposite direction, in the same direction where he was originally heading. Even the air around him seemed to be hot, just like himself. He is incandescent with the stupid pride of a young man, which seemed to make him blind.

Hearing these words, Ajit almost stopped and slapped his face with his palm. He hoped that his companion would be indecisive, that he would be able to frighten him and that he would moderate his ardor. But nothing came of it. Nothing good, anyway.

Ajit stood there for a minute, not knowing what to do. It seemed to him possible to follow Asha now, but something stopped him. And he couldn't figure out what it was. He felt as if he was afraid of Asha, or rather, of his excitement and imprudence. But he wasn't really going to drive him away, they were only trying to pacify him by tempering the youth's ardor. But his trick didn't work, and Ajit should have caught up with his only ally as soon as possible.

He reluctantly strode forward, trying to concentrate on what to do next, while increasing his pace. Ajit no longer heard Asha's footsteps (although he still saw him), for some reason he did not hear

the rustle of leaves, although he felt a light breeze on his skin. It would seem strange to him if he thought about it, but he was quite hard trying to construct at least some plan of action in his head. In the silence that enveloped Ajit almost instantly, it wasn't too hard to think about anything. He talked to himself in his mind, trying to reason:

"To the palace... We need to get to the palace. There is no way through the main entrance. Ah..."

In the next instant, his thoughts stopped abruptly, because the silence that surrounded him suddenly turned into a rapidly growing rumble that seemed to come from the ground. Moreover, Ajit immediately noticed one strange feature: he did not feel the ground shaking, did not hear the echo. It was as if this sound was growing somewhere inside him, gradually plugging his ears and even forcing him to close his eyes from sharp pain. Ajit felt that he was coming, but his legs did not quite obey him. Then he felt as if he had vomited from his body for a moment, and he saw nothing but complete darkness in front of him. Then he saw the stone-paved road in front of him again, his ears picking up some set of sounds from the ordinary world, including the sound of his own footsteps. Suddenly, it was as if something exploded in his head, the hum disappeared, and instead of it, pain and trembling spread throughout his body. Almost immediately after that, he felt that he heard nothing again, except for one thing - a strange ringing in his ears. Darkness again. A second of unconsciousness... Cold... Now he felt an incredible cold, which was chilling from inside and outside at the same time. He fettered him, it seemed that not only he could not move, but also his thoughts. They practically stopped. Then everything sped up sharply and, coming to his senses, Ajit found himself almost lying on the road, with his hands resting on it. Instantly, a second wave of cold crept up his arms, coming from the ground and climbing down his throat. For a second, it seemed to Ajit that he was dying, his arms and legs not obeying him, and the shiver crept through him more and more. It seemed that even the heartbeats were getting weaker under her powerful pressure. Then, suddenly, these incomprehensible shackles released him, he felt the ability to move. He jumped off the ground as sharply as possible, and was about to run, but suddenly stopped abruptly. He felt that he could not run, that he could not move again. But now there was nothing holding him back, just his whole mind refused to run. Out of despair... Ajit saw the light from the locket on his chest and instantly lost all hope. His mental strength left him, he wanted to fall and die without waiting for what would happen next. From the cold and light, he understood everything. At first, he still hoped for something, but the light from the locket shattered all doubts in an instant. Nightmare... The old nightmare returned to his life again,

overtook him again. And he no longer had the desire to fight. The only thing he still wanted was to face his death, which in every possible way proved its inevitability.

Ajit turned sharply, nothing in him resisting it. He was already preparing to face something terrible. Familiar in their own way, but no less terrible. However, Ajit didn't see anything. Nothing that would stand out sharply against the background of the already familiar night picture. But he felt the ground trembling beneath him, that what he was waiting for was about to happen. That they would burst out from somewhere and scream into his body with furious force, tearing the life out of his cold-soaked body.

But things didn't go as he expected.

Ajit suddenly saw cracks creep across the ground, a few steps away from where he stood. A blinding yellow light immediately began to ooze out of them, which made him instinctively cover himself with his palm. I could hear the stones that paved the road crumbling and flying away into the abyss.

Involuntarily, for some reason, he took a step towards this light, feeling the breath of the abyss that was hiding under a bright, almost white veil. After a few seconds, his eyes somehow got used to the light, and he lowered his hand. The cracks continued to run in all directions. Ajit felt the shaking of the breaking rocks beneath his feet, but he did not move from the spot, as if something was holding him.

Suddenly he felt something pulling him forward into the abyss, in spite of the light it was clearly visible, and he tried to resist it. He wanted to run away. Run as far as he can. Forget everything and see no one. The cold was replaced by fear, from which a lump in the throat rose and sent waves of trembling through the body. Ajit felt the air around him become thick, as if something had been mixed into it. And he could no longer resist what was pulling him forward - the locket seemed to be calling him along, and the incredibly cold chain burned his neck, digging into it. Without taking a step, Ajit only began to bend down, unable to fight the incredible weight. He no longer understood whether it was his own powerlessness or the power of the Sand that had overtaken him after so many years.

From the moment he parted with Asha, no more than two minutes passed, and he did not have time to go far, although it seemed to Ajit that he did not hear his footsteps. But Asha, noticing a strong tremor under his feet and a light hitting his back, turned, and, forgetting about the quarrel, rushed to his companion, anticipating something was wrong. And he made it just in time: when Ajit was standing at the edge of the huge abyss, leaning heavily over it, Asha grabbed him by the clothes on his back a few seconds before falling. Ajit had already managed to spread his arms to the sides, resigned,

as it seemed to Asha, to the fact that he would now have to part with his life. But Ajit himself did not feel anything, his consciousness stopped moving, his eyes rolled back and he, controlled by an unknown and incredible force, was about to take the last step in his life.

Asha jerked him back, causing the chain to dig deeper into Ajit's neck, causing him to let out a cry of pain mixed with coughing and wheezing. But this cry was already conscious, the young man instantly assessed the situation and took a few steps back. He then turned around and freed himself from Asha's hand, which was still clutching his clothes. In the eyes of the second one could read a genuine fear of the unknown. Ajit, who had regained his consciousness, put his hand on Ashe's chest and went at him, forcing him to step back. From this movement, Asha himself came to his senses and stepped aside. He was too excited to ask questions now—and the timing was not right—even though they were tearing him apart from the inside. He had already realized that Ajit knew something about what was going on, and perhaps quite a lot.

Meanwhile, something incredible and even terrible continued to happen. It seemed to both of them that even the stars in the sky were trembling, which was about to crack and collapse on them with its weight. And a second later, long black stripes burst out of the ground, mixed with an even more inflamed, but not at all warming light, which stood out sharply against the white background, which seemed to absorb him. Asha and Ajit stood in place, about twenty paces from the edge, silently watching what was happening. Asha's face was filled with determination instead of fear, especially when he saw that two large white eyes appeared from the ground, writhing like huge snakes, as if illuminated from within. And this light was just as cold, empty and frightening. For some reason, in the whole image of the monster, gradually appearing from the ground, the most noticeable were these two circles, in which there were not even pupils - only absolutely white glowing lights.

The owner of this cold gaze had already managed to show his full height by the time Asha looked up from him and realized what was going on. It seemed that the monster did not crawl out of the ground, but slowly, without moving its legs, floated through the air, waving its huge tentacles, which turned out to be those strange streaks that ate up the light. Yes, it was a monster of incredible height - about two humans. The first heavy footsteps were heard, each time their sound resembling the blow of a large hammer on a stone. A black silhouette gradually emerged from the smoke - the air thickened so much that the light became smoke, with a yellowish tint - and it was possible to see the monster perfectly.

Black, with smooth shiny skin, here and there cut with strange patterns, it caused horror. The figure of the creature resembled a man, but it was devoid of human features on the face: instead of a nose there were two holes, the mouth was almost impossible to see, and it had no chin - a short but powerful neck almost immediately turned into a head, on which flaunted two horns, curved in different directions and gleaming in the glow. His gigantic shoulders were striking, on which you could see some growths like thorns, but it seemed that they wriggled as they walked, like tentacles. Hands of incredible thickness, which any strongman could envy, ended with massive palms, with long sharp claws.

At first, it seemed that its tentacles were growing from everywhere, but upon closer inspection, Asha noticed that they came mainly from behind the monster (or beast, as he preferred to call this creature) and from somewhere in the belly. Moreover, those that grew from behind were longer and ended in something like sharp spears with serrations. If at least one such beast pierces a person, then the latter will lose his life in the blink of an eye. The ones that grew out of the belly, which had strange small swellings, were soft in appearance and did not seem to pose much danger, but at the same time there was something sinister about them and one did not want to approach or touch them.

The monster came close to the warriors and, sharply drawing in its stomach, literally shot its tentacles at Ajit, grabbing him by the shoulders, by the neck and slowly approaching the locket. And then the cold ran through the metal, the light from which began to fill with some specks of dust - the locket seemed to melt from this touch, when suddenly, full of determination, Asha, full of determination, rushed at the beast and, without wasting a moment, struck these very tentacles with his sword. Immediately after that, a scream was heard. But, he didn't belong to a monster. Asha screamed in pain, who, having struck a blow, immediately felt a scorching cold in his hand, which, sliding like lightning across the sword, crashed into his right palm. He dropped his sword and grabbed his right wrist with his left hand, for some reason pressing his hand to his mouth. At the same moment, the beast's eyes narrowed, reddened as if someone had poured blood into them, after which it let out another terrifying roar and turned to Asha. He immediately saw several more sharp tentacles slip out from behind the monster, and they immediately rushed in his direction. Forgetting about the pain, Asha jumped back abruptly, leaving his weapon out of reach for himself, and continued to keep a close eye on the beast, mentally preparing to dodge new attacks. And they would certainly have followed - it was felt that the monster was seriously angry - if not for Ajit, who seized a free moment and kicked the monster in the knee with all his strength. It is

unlikely that he hurt the beast, but it attracted its attention - it immediately turned to him.

Ajit's face was contorted into a fierce grimace that told him he was ready for anything. Inevitability pushed him to this.

The same ferocity could be read on the monster's face, and in a moment he justified it: like a long ice whip, the monster struck Ajit in the face, leaving a long red mark on it. Ajit roared and fell backwards to the ground, shielding himself with his hand from the new blows that rained down on him, burning his hand. At the same time, frightened and enraged by the monster's superiority, he stood on his other arm and tried to crawl back, but he failed, because in the next second, the beast threw several of its sharp spears at Ajit, severely scratching the poor fellow's chest. He shuddered from the force of the blow, coughed loudly, unable to scream and stopped resisting. He knew: another second, and he would die. The monster will take the locket first, and then his life.

And so it would have happened if Asha hadn't grabbed his sword again and tried once more to cut off the monstrous tentacles that fluttered in all directions. Despite the wild pain that this must have caused Asha himself, he decided to do this audacity again. And he instantly paid for it: the monster hit him with its deadly weapon, hitting him on the shoulder. Asha roared and stepped back in horror.

These seconds were enough for Ajit to gather his strength, jump up from the ground with one sharp jerk, and rush to Asha. He did not try to distract the monster, but used moments of confusion only to run up to Asha, grab him by the collar with both hands, pull him to him and shout loudly:

-Run! Leave me, run!

-But...! Asha tried to object, his face now really lit up with horror.

"RUN, FOOL!" Ajit interrupted these attempts, his gaze now seemed distraught, but incredibly convincing.

And as soon as he shouted the last words, Ajit felt the cold slide down his spine again in wide stripes. Something jerked him back, then to the side - the monster threw him onto the road with incredible force, causing Ajit to roll several times, each time hitting his head painfully against the rocks. He felt his consciousness fading, floating away somewhere, merging with the Sand. Ajit could hardly see what was happening: his eyes were beginning to darken. Suddenly, suddenly, as it always happens a moment before death, he remembered his wife. He could see her face clearly now, no matter what, even if he closed his eyes. His two young sons. And then a sharp arrow of pain pierced his heart: he had lost them once and would never get them back. Maybe where he was about to go, though, he could find them. To see at least one more time. He didn't

notice how a tear slid down his cheek, and a desperate cry escaped from his chest, from which Asha, who was about to make another attempt, stopped abruptly and dropped his sword. If Ajit could make out the parts, he would have seen the young man's hands tremble. Then he knelt down, and, without taking his eyes off the monster, tried to find his weapon on the ground by touch.

Then something abruptly forced Ajit to come to his senses. He didn't know if it was his random memories that had awakened a desire for revenge or anything else, but knowing what the sensation was coming, he grabbed the tentacle that swept past his face as tightly as he could. He did it to get back on his feet in the fastest way possible. In the confusion, he saw Asha out of the corner of his eye:

-Run! Ajit shouted to him again.

This time, Asha listened to him: he took a few hesitant steps back, and then turned around and ran away with all his strength.

Ajit managed to mentally say goodbye to the young man and tried to strike the monster with his sword at random. But this pathetic attempt was instantly stopped: he felt a huge hand hit him in the chest, and he flew backwards and then fell. How the earth trembles around him under the weight of powerful steps. As the cold again slides like a wave over his body. How the earth around him explodes from the tentacles-spears crashing into it, cutting off the way to retreat. How darkness falls on his consciousness like a new stream and deprives him of strength. How he falls into it and ceases to exist.

All Ajit saw in front of him was a huge black silhouette and some kind of movement. He could not move and could hardly feel anything, only noticed that the light from the abyss was completely extinguished - perhaps the beast had swallowed him, absorbed him and destroyed him.

And now two ice tentacles are already creeping up his chest, touching the locket, and the other beast is raising over Ajit's head in order to end all his suffering in an instant with one blow and end this fight, the winner of which was determined in advance.

The locket suddenly flashed unusually brightly, gradually dispelling the darkness. But even through that light, Ajit caught a blank spot like the one he and Asha had seen a short time before. It was approaching them from somewhere to the side, from where Asha had fled. When it approached at high speed, it seemed to the dying person for a second that it was a huge dog. Then he suddenly felt a warmth that grew stronger with each passing moment, after which he felt his eyes close by themselves and he was no longer capable of anything. At the last second, a thought flashed through his mind:

"So this is how it happens..."

The unsuspecting monster, which had already thrown its spears at Ajit, suddenly flew to the side, not reaching its target, as if it had been struck by someone with incredible force. The monster rolled along the road, scattering clods of earth and small stones with random blows of tentacles and swings of giant arms. Ajit fell right where a minute or two ago there had been a light-breathing abyss that had inexplicably healed, leaving no special traces other than the cobblestones scattered everywhere.

The beast looked around fiercely, not understanding what was going on, jumped to its feet, still continuously brandishing its monstrous spears in an attempt to kill the invisible enemy. And his enemy, that mysterious white spot in the air, struck the next blow, but this time the monster was ready and did not fall. However, something strange was still happening to him: he grabbed his stomach with both hands, as if he was trying to tear it open and take out something that attacked him. But he couldn't do it, and he let out a loud scream, scream, or growl, a sound that couldn't be exactly named, it was like it all at once. The scream was so strong that even Asha, who had run away, must have heard it.

The beast suddenly stretched his hands to his chest, and then to his throat - something crawled inside him, spilled all over his body. He felt something that he could hardly resist, but which was incredibly alien to him. The strange patterns that were twisting all over his body suddenly flashed with a bright light. Then the same thing happened to his eyes, and instead of red, they returned to their original color.

In a second, the monster, no longer able to resist what had seized him, raised his hand to the sky, fell to the ground with a heavy body and stopped moving.

Chapter 15. Master of the Sands

The prince and Farah moved towards the nearest door that led to the balcony, which would surely lead to somewhere else.

"I think we'd better go outside the palace: it can be dangerous in the narrow corridors." Suddenly..." the Prince began to speak.

"Go away!" Get! A fierce male voice came from somewhere below, followed by a clang of metal and loud footsteps.

The prince and Farah stopped and looked at each other in silence, and then, without agreeing, ran back to the railing.

Below, fighting off the sand monster, a Bactrian soldier was running. Even from here, from above, it was noticeable that his clothes were stained - sometimes with blood, sometimes with dirt and dust.

-Get! The warrior shouted with even greater desperation, trying in vain to fend off the enemy's attacks.

Farah, seeing what was happening, immediately grabbed her bow, put an arrow into it and was about to shoot, when the Prince, putting out his hand in her direction, said:

-Weather. Myself!

It is not known what exactly prompted him to do this. Perhaps he was convinced that his dagger was the only effective weapon (and he had reason to believe so) against the sand creatures, or perhaps he was rebelled by pride and a desire to prove that it was faster and deadlier than any arrow.

Farah was angered again by the Prince's behavior. It seems that he did not understand anything. She held back her emotions, but prepared to shoot an arrow if something went wrong. Now is not the best moment, but she will find time to tell him that they need to learn to act together.

The prince put his sword behind his back, leaving only the dagger in his hands, jumped onto the marble railing and, without hesitation, rushed down from a considerable height, aiming straight at the monster's back. A second of flight. Predatory, confident eyes. A hand raised menacingly above his head, a chest spread wide, legs slightly bent at the knees... To the prince, these moments seemed like an eternity. Perhaps without fully realizing it, he enjoyed them, the freedom they gave. Namely, freedom. A pitiful second of freedom that he got by jumping down. It gave him some kind of calm. And something else, he didn't know what it was, but he didn't want to let go of this feeling. He had already realized that the taste of murder was not so sweet, but rather disgusting. But now he found meaning in it, more than before. And so he brought his blow down on his victim and, catching on her back and holding on to a scrap of clothing, pulled her back. The monster somehow withstood the blow

and did not turn into a cloud of sand dust, but on the contrary, began to resist, clumsily trying to throw the Prince off with his hand. But he jumped into the air with a sharp jerk, jumped over the head of the monster and with one accurate blow cut the chest of the enemy. He could not bear this blow, staggered back and collapsed to the floor. And in a second, only scraps of Persian ammunition remained lying on the floor, and the air became sparkling and yellow, a little reminiscent of fog.

"Are you all right?" Farah's voice came from above.

The prince, who had not yet recovered from the fight, threw his head up sharply, and then, realizing what was going on, answered:

-Yes! I—" the Prince began to answer.

But at that moment, the rescued man spoke.

"Thank you," he said dryly. He didn't seem to lose any of his composure, despite the unequal fight. He quickly realized that there were people in front of him. Monsters don't speak. Monsters do not save. Although he did not quite like that he was saved by some young man and a girl.

"Who are you?" The Prince asked, switching to the soldier.

"My name is Essen," he said, sitting down on a piece of wall. Still, it was clear that the fight had pretty much battered him and he needed to catch his breath and think.

It was almost a minute before he continued to speak.

"I am the commander of the guard platoon in the eastern wing of the palace. And who are you? And how did you manage to deal with the monster so quickly? So many of my people have died, these creatures are immortal, damn it! What's going on here?"

The prince approached him, sheathing his dagger on his belt as he went, and crouched cross-legged across from Essen. After a few seconds of looking into the stern face of his interlocutor, the Prince answered:

"I am the Prince of Persia, and my father and I have come to Azad with gifts for the Sultan and to rest before the long journey home. Shahraman, my father, is an old friend and..."

"I know who Shahraman is. But a son doesn't always look like his father," Essen interrupted the Prince. "Better tell me what happened here?" Where did these creatures come from?

"These monsters are creatures of the Sands of Time. All the chaos around is the Sands of Time unleashed," the Prince said and stopped. He hesitated.

"What is this Sands of Time?" And where did they come from? Essen did not calm down. He was determined to get to the bottom of the truth.

"This is the trophy of our victory in India. And one of the gifts to your Sultan," the Prince continued.

"So you brought them here?" Essen asked even more sternly.

-Yes! But..." the Prince still hesitated.

-But what? I hope there is some explanation for this? Otherwise, this is a war against Azad, a betrayal of Persia, and you are my main enemy right here and now! Essen was ready to grab his sword again.

"Let me explain!" The Prince replied decisively. He did not expect that this conversation could turn into a confrontation.

"I'm listening," Essen replied more calmly.

"First of all, Shahraman and almost the entire Persian army are dead. Such a sacrifice is clearly not the best tactic for waging war," the Prince began. "And secondly, I saved your life after all.

"Okay, that sounds convincing," Essen replied even more calmly. "Then who is behind all this?" Who is waging this war against our two peoples?

"A vizier has come with us from India. He helped organize a secret attack on his city, betraying Maharaja," the Prince continued. - He...

"Wait, now it's my turn," Essen said suddenly, which made the Prince feel relieved. Now he had time to think for a while. "I think I know who you're talking about."

And then Essen told his story:

"I was making my evening rounds. As I passed by the Sultan's library, suddenly the walls shook everywhere, stones fell from above. Usually there is always silence and nothing ever happens. But this time... It became difficult to breathe, someone was screaming in the distance. At first, I didn't want to leave my post, but then the wall almost collapsed on me, and I decided to leave to find out what was wrong. I chose the path through the library. I went through the entrance on the second floor and looked down - there were hundreds of soldiers standing there. All of them were Bactrians and Persians. But something was wrong with them. And it seemed to me that they... Glow! And their clothes were kind of tattered. It was quiet, no one moved, and the walls remained in place. I froze and began to observe. Suddenly I saw an old man walking between them. It did not glow. When the old man walked halfway through the hall, I suddenly realized where he was going. I don't know why, but I didn't notice it before! A huge bowl stood at the other end of the hall, and above it was a yellow glowing ball. It was hanging right in the air! The old man walked over to the bowl, waved his staff, and shouted something. The ball slowly descended. Then, for some reason, one soldier walked up to the old man and stood in front of him.

"Yes, it's him, the vizier." It seems that he knows how to control the Sands and pursues some of his own goals," the Prince interjected.

There was silence. Essen was thinking about something, and the Prince and Farah quickly exchanged glances. Both understood that

Essen was unlikely to like the truth. Now this is their common secret for some time. And a confirmation of their recent union. Although it would not be possible to keep the secret for a long time, the Prince understood that Essen would have new questions that would drive the young man into a dead end. But now the time has not yet come.

- What happened next? The Prince broke the silence.

Essen was not as simple as it might seem, and asked back, pointing to Farah:

"And who is she?"

"It doesn't matter yet. Finish, you and I will tell you," the Prince replied.

Essen frowned (he could hear Farah speaking in a language he didn't understand), but continued:

"The old man took his staff, struck the soldier in the chest with it, and pierced him through!" It fell and stopped glowing. It seems that he has disappeared altogether. And the old man turned around, pulled the staff up and stuck it into the ball. He immediately fell. Then the ball turned to dust, and something fell into the bowl, and the rest fell on the floor around it. And immediately it became as light as day!

-That's all? Were you alone? And where are the rest of the guards? Those you fought," the Prince asked.

- That was later. I found some of my people. Many were scared, but before I could question them about everything, these monsters appeared! I heard some pops, and in the semi-darkness I saw two eyes. Then two more. Eyes were coming from all sides. I drew my sword and struck several times at random. I hit him! I swear I hit it! I saw his wound! But he didn't even move. And then I heard him draw his sword. I'm brave, but I'm not stupid - if I didn't really see the enemy, I wouldn't have coped. I tried to run away from him, or at least find a bright room. After a while, I stopped to catch my breath. I even thought that I had broken away, but one of them was about ten steps away from me and was walking towards me! The same one you killed. It was then that I saw him. He didn't even have blood on him, his wounds glowed yellow. And no matter how hard I tried, he seemed to be invulnerable! The rest died during this fight.

"We faced the same thing. But, I assure you, they are not immortal. I possess the enemy's weapons, and I hope to turn his power against him," the Prince explained.

At these words, he took a dagger from his belt and, placing it in his palms, showed it to Essen.

"Here it is, it's a dagger. It can kill these creatures! The Prince continued.

Essen listened in surprise to the Prince, and when he took out his dagger, he involuntarily reached out to touch it.

"How did you manage to get it?" Where can I get the same? With such a weapon, I would be much calmer," Essen said demanding, and, touching the blade, added dryly: "Cold."

Farah was surprised at how easily the Prince allowed the stranger to touch the dagger. He suspected her even after a slight movement of his hand, and here... "Although, probably, he is still playing his game and gaining the trust of Essen," Phare thought a few seconds later. She calmed down and continued to listen to the conversation.

The prince withdrew his hands and put away his dagger. It seemed to him that Essen had his eye on the dagger, and now he would have to keep an eye on it as well. Farah seemed to be less determined, and anything could be expected from their new acquaintance. He will still choose the moment to prove himself. But now it can be useful.

The prince thought it was time to introduce Farah:

"This is Farah. She is an Indian princess who was waiting for the fate of a slave. But by the will of fate, everything went completely wrong, and now she is my companion and accidental ally.

"An Indian princess?" Essen burst out. "What if she's an enemy too?" Is this vizier not enough for you? How can you trust her? Now she belongs in a dungeon while all this is happening. And only then can you figure out whether she is an enemy or not!

"No, it's inappropriate now. She helped me when I was wounded. Besides, she knows a little more about the Sands than I do, and we're going to fix it. Our enemy is the vizier! The prince raised his tone, trying to convey his point of view to Essen.

"I guessed it myself!" Essen replied angrily. He was still very suspicious of both the Prince and Farah, but he still did not know which way to approach, and so he gave up temporarily. Meanwhile, the Prince helped Farah down from the balcony into the hall.

Again, the conversation was replaced by silence, which was broken by Farah after a while:

"When I was a child, my father showed me a dagger, saying that he had brought it from a long journey. Then I saw the Clock, he said that there was a great power in it that must never come out, otherwise...

"Otherwise, what?" The Prince asked.

- Probably, he meant what is happening now. He just said it shouldn't happen again," Farah said.

-Repeat? Has this happened before? The Prince was surprised.

"I don't know," Farah said. "I guess I've told you everything, and it's only when we get to the Clock that I may be able to think of something."

"The clock is the vessel in which the Sand was stored," the Prince explained to Essen, although he did not ask. "A huge hourglass, and in it are the Sands of Time. Our task is to enclose them back in these Hours.

All this time, Essen collected his thoughts and at the same time watched him and Farah. He did not understand much from their story, but he was not interested in the nature or history of the Sands. After thinking about it, he continued his questions, trying to find something.

"Where did you get this dagger?" If I had any plans like this vizier's, I would keep him with me! After all, this is the only threat to him!

However, the showdown had to be postponed, because suddenly the silence of the hall that surrounded them was cut by the shrill cries of birds. The three of them turned around in fright at the sound and saw several huge black birds, already familiar to the Prince, flying into the hall through the huge window.

-Run! Hide in the throne room! Faster! The Prince shouted to Phare and Essen. "Only a dagger can defeat them!"

Farah, already drawing the string with the arrow, hesitated for a few seconds, lowered her bow and ran into the throne room after Essen. He already knew his enemy, and therefore was in no hurry to enter the battle again without a chance of victory.

The birds flew in a wedge, the heavy flapping of giant wings was heard. Their bright yellow eyes burned with deadly fire. In a matter of seconds, they managed to fly dangerously close to the Prince, and then the Prince saw a human figure sitting on the neck of one of the birds. It was the vizier. He still held his staff in his hand. The prince noticed the predatory expression of his eyes, which differed from those of a bird only in that they still had pupils, which made them still resemble human ones.

"My young Prince!" Greetings again! The vizier spoke, somehow causing the bird on which he was riding to freeze in one place, making only occasional flapping of his wings. Others at this time broke a wedge and circled over the Prince's head, ready at any second at the silent order of their master to rush at the victim and tear him to shreds.

"What do you want?!" The Prince shouted, literally seething with anger.

-Do you know! This dagger. But you don't want to give it away! So I'll take it by force!" A triumphant smile hung on the vizier's face. He was absolutely sure of himself.

"Why do you need him?" Isn't the nightmare you've created really enough?! The Prince replied furiously, ready to rush at his enemy.

"This nightmare, as you say, was not done by me alone! Amar replied in the same triumphant tone. And Essen heard this phrase as he ran into the throne room. Now his suspicions have intensified.

The Prince did not have a second to think about the vizier's last words, for the next moment he aimed his bird directly at the Prince, and it intended to cut his chest with its beak in order to quickly kill him. But the Prince jumped abruptly to the side, rolled over and prepared to fight to the last, drawing his sword from behind his back. He wasn't that afraid of pain or death. Maybe he even deserved them. But the vizier deserved them no less, so he had at least one unfinished business. Now all the Prince's illusions that the vizier could somehow help were finally dispelled. His intentions were clear, and he was even angry with himself: how could he believe him even for a second?

And the Prince immediately rushed in his direction. He had to run some ten steps to his goal. But why did he forget about the rest of the birds? Is rage really so blinding?

Somehow, the Prince felt sharp claws rip open his back, as he fell to the floor. How he tries to roll over in horror and anger and wave away the nightmarish beast with his father's sword.

"Now I will deal with you, and then with your friends!" Think of them and give me the dagger! The vizier continued.

The prince saw a huge beak raised above his head. Just one blow and it would be all over for him. He will be killed, and the vizier will get the dagger. And then...

"No! This should not happen!" - flashed through the Prince's head.

He was only momentarily ahead of the most powerful blow. The floor beneath him shook, and there was a crack as the stone crumbled from such a blow, turning into dust. The strength of the birds' beaks was amazing - even after such blows, nothing happened to them. They would make excellent shields that no weapon could penetrate. Then another blow followed, this time closer to his head. But he was lucky again, he was able to dodge. Then another blow. Once again, the Prince survived. The bird, apparently enraged by the misses, screamed shrilly, making the walls of the hall tremble, along which the waves echoed. Without closing her beak, she tried to strike again. And again bad luck for her: the Prince managed to turn so that both crushing blows fell on opposite sides of him.

The next seconds turned out to be fatal for the bird. The prince, taking advantage of the accidental moments, grabbed the bird's long but thin tongue in order to stand up with a sharp movement and finally deliver a blow that would finish it off. The prince had time to notice the feeling of disgust that swept over him when he grabbed his tongue. The sword slash landed somewhere inside the bird's mouth,

so the sword then came out through the neck. It is not known why, the blow turned out to be fatal. This sword was also capable of killing monsters. A moment's thought flashed through the Prince's mind: "He protects me even after death!"

The bird, screaming loudly, jerked back, beat its wings, trying to fly into the air. But the agony that gripped her body did not allow her to fly far: after a couple of desperate strokes and hooking another bird, she crashed into one of the columns propping up the balcony. Stones fell, the balcony collapsed in the place where the pillar was. The bird turned into a thick golden cloud, which immediately dispersed throughout the hall, mixing with the air and poisoning it. In the next second, two more birds rushed towards the Prince, their huge clawed paws thrust forward. But the Prince managed to run to the side, and then ran up the half-collapsed slab to the balcony. Down there, he was too vulnerable. An accidental mistake could cost him his life. And the desire to live filled him again, he saw a new meaning in it.

The prince stepped back to the wall, inhaled sharply and sonorously, and ran to the railing, towards freedom. Again these sweet moments of freedom, in which he himself felt like a bird. He pushed off the edge with his foot and stretched out his arms to grab the wing of the bird, which flew very close. The next swing threw him onto the back of the feathered monster. It was so large that the Prince could stand on it freely. He took a sharp step towards the bird's head and with one blow, before it could understand anything, cut its neck... The bird's head, separate from the body, fell sonorously to the floor, throwing clouds of sand dust into the air. Almost immediately, the huge body began to melt. The prince turned around and used the two steps he had in reserve, ran away and rushed at the other bird. Pushing off, he felt his leg begin to sink into something soft, causing his jump to be rather weak and he almost fell down from a great height. Almost miraculously, he managed to grab the black feathers with one hand, on which he immediately climbed onto the mighty neck, away from the formidable paws with which the bird tried to throw off its annoying opponent. The prince was too bad on horseback to strike with his sword and finish off another monster. And if he cuts off his head, he will fall down with it. And he will die. He and all his hopes. For some reason, the prince was sure that a lot depended on him, although he was only the current owner of the dagger. If the blade fell into the hands of someone else, everything would depend on its new owner.

The giant bird on which the Prince was hanging, unable to get rid of him immediately, dived sharply down, and at the very floor it rapidly soared up and rushed towards the huge window from which they had flown a minute ago. With great difficulty, the prince

managed to hold on, but a sword slipped from his hand and hit the marble floor with a resounding sound. And almost immediately, the sound was lost in the whistling of the wind, which struck the Prince sharply in the face, throwing back his hair. They flew out. He is also a bird. Now his life depended on her, and hers to some extent on him. If he does not kill her, then she herself can take his life; If he killed her, he would fall down and die anyway. The freedom that he loved so much was too dangerous for him and lost its sweetness because of it. The prince felt despair creeping through his rage, he felt bewildered. There, in the hall, he had an incomparably greater chance of staying alive.

The bird with which he was flying towards the wind tried to turn over sharply in the air, now and then rushing up and down, trying to throw off its rider. Circling around a dome, the bird flew towards the Tower of Dawn. The prince felt that they were flying very close to her, that if he stretched out his hand he would be able to reach her walls. He wanted to unclench his fingers and rush towards the dark silhouette, into which a huge column of bright white light was beating directly from the sky, surrounded by a terrible whirlwind that obscured part of the star-studded sky from view.

And so, being so close (as it seemed to the Prince) to the desired goal, he felt that some unknown, powerful, but silent force was pulling the bird back into the hall. Another random thought flashed through his head - the vizier wants him to die there. Simply because the dagger will fall to who knows where and it may take a long time to find it. It's time... It's time... Everything around him depended on him, obeyed him. The Prince's life depended on time, the fate of the whole world depended on time. From the time it takes for the Prince to get to the tower and return the world to normal, banishing the whole nightmare beyond its borders.

Flying into the hall, the bird kept low to the floor. Without hesitation, the Prince plunged his dagger into her back and jumped back. To the very place where the vizier's bird was sitting. He himself had already dismounted from it and stood at a distance. If the Prince hadn't killed the last bird, then it would surely have crashed into him because it was flying too low. But this did not happen: Amar was only swept over by a whirlwind of sand wind - this is all that remained of the mighty beast. The bird that the Prince fell upon suffered the same fate a second later: one sharp stab in the back, a yellow flash of the dagger hilt through which the Sand could be seen, exactly the same as in the Hourglass. The prince remembered this brilliance for a long time. He used to think he was handsome. He was disgusting to him now, and if he could, he would get rid of it! But he couldn't.

The prince again felt a firm footing under his feet. Now it gave him more joy, much more than the imaginary freedom that resembled

a huge ocean: if you went knee-deep, it was really beautiful, but if you plunged headlong, you might not swim out.

Taking quick steps and running away before the next blow, the Prince himself almost crushed the stone - so much did his anger overwhelm him. He wanted to kill Amar - this is not yet a victory over the Sands, but a big step towards it. And again his blind rage played a cruel joke on him.

He jumped from the rock that was still lying in the center of the hall. A few moments separated him from his goal. From victory. And now the taste of someone else's death seemed sweet and alluring again - this death meant too much. It had to happen, and there could be no other way.

But this did not happen - the Prince jumped into the black body of the bird, which tried to grab him in its huge paws in the air. Fortunately for the Prince, she did not succeed, otherwise anything could happen: she could crush him, squeezing him with these paws, she could throw him from a great height, from the ceiling, and then no luck would save him. Death, having passed a step away from the Prince, showering him with its cold breath, for some reason made him think of Farah.

"She's all right!" he said to himself. He was worried about her. He felt that he was responsible for her life.

He fell to the floor, then immediately jumped to his feet and dodged the blow of the huge claws that seemed to have been created to bring him death. He saw Amar turn and walk away.

-Wait! The Prince shouted with all his strength. "I'll kill you!"

"Hurry up and my faithful birds will deal with you!" And I'll be back soon and get the dagger!" The vizier replied with mockery and contempt in his voice.

"You won't succeed!" The Prince shouted, dodging the bird's new attacks.

"It's already out, Prince. It's already out! The vizier said, stopping and turning his gaze to the Prince, full of majesty. Greatness similar to that of a king. He felt like the master of this place. Or maybe he was.

The Prince rushed after him, but it was too late: Amar had already gone to another hall, and the Prince was being chased by the two surviving birds, eager to kill him. It is not known what drove them - the desire to destroy embedded in the Sand itself, or the vizier's order. The Prince didn't have time to think about it, and a wall suddenly rose in front of him. But he didn't rush aside for one simple reason: the prince suddenly realized that these birds are quite stupid and very easy to deceive. He rushed up the wall with all his might, pushing sharply with his legs and trying to run as high as possible. Taking quick steps, the Prince felt both birds crash into the

wall one by one, breaking through it. Another second, and the Prince pushed off with his legs, did a backflip and brought down a dagger blow on one of the birds. Without waiting for what will happen to the first, he rushes at the second and kills it. Two disgusting screams broke the silence of the night again, two flashes, two thick clouds, and now everything was over.

The prince, without a moment's hesitation, rushed into the throne room, chasing after Amar.

"Nothing can save him now!" he thought to himself as he ran, breathing heavily. The prince literally cut the air with his body. Air poisoned by Sand. Here he was most poisoned by it. But in spite of everything, the Prince fled, every now and then forcefully sucking in this air, and then abruptly throwing it out, not feeling how the Sand remained in it and poisoned him as well.

The prince saw the vizier pass by the place where the Hourglass stood not long ago, and go to Farah and Essen. He must catch up with him and kill him.

"Why is he coming to them?! What does he want from Farah?!" - frantic fragments of thoughts flashed in his hot head.

The prince himself did not notice how often he thought of her. He had recognized her only half an hour or an hour ago, but she already meant a lot in his life. Maybe also because there were almost no other living people around. Suddenly he remembered how there, in the desert, she got it from a soldier. Probably not for anything, but simply because she is a prisoner, and he is a warden. He remembered the inordinate sadness that had settled in her eyes forever.

"This must not happen again!" - for some reason it surfaced in the Prince's mind.

-Wait! He shouted with a vengeance, choking and wheezing.

Amar did not react to the shout, and only quickened his pace. He was far enough from the Prince, and he was not far from Farah and Essen.

Farah raised her bow and shot an arrow at the vizier. He held out his staff in front of him, and an unknown force shattered the arrow to pieces. Farah opened her eyes wide in surprise and stepped back in fright. She was frightened that Amar did not look like the decrepit old man she had known before.

"Don't come near us!" She cried in despair. It could not be said that she was really afraid of him. It's just that the wave of surprise that covered her like an avalanche turned into fright, which squeezed these words out of her.

-Quite! I've heard enough of the orders of the mean girl and her dad! Resentment flashed in the vizier's eyes. In such eyes,

resentment was more terrible and dangerous than the most terrible anger.

Essen, who had remained by Farah's side all this time, raised his sword and rushed at the vizier. The vizier's eyes did not betray a monster in him, and this time Essen at least had a chance. But when he was two or three steps away from the blow, Amar suddenly grabbed his staff with both hands, and, pointing the other end of it, towards the soldier, struck the air with it as if with a spear, without even hitting Essen. But the same unknown force that had broken the arrow threw him back. Flying through the air, the Bactrian fell to the floor, rolled over it, and, apparently hitting one of the many stones scattered everywhere, groaned in pain.

"You see, princess... No one will help you! Amar spoke triumphantly again. And without waiting for anything, he struck Farah with his staff, scratching her hand painfully. Farah screamed in unexpected pain and staggered. The vizier approached her and, taking advantage of her fright and defenselessness, painfully squeezed her hand, staining his own in her blood, staring at her and terrifying her with a vile smile.

The prince, hearing Farah's scream, burned with a thirst for revenge. Not for himself, but for her. Meanwhile, the vizier pushed the princess aside and turned to the Prince, saying:

"Do you really like possessing this dagger so much?" Because of you, people, both close and barely acquainted, suffer! I only wanted to have a dagger, and you brought trouble on everyone! So which of us is the villain?

The prince almost reached the vizier and made a sharp leap into the air, aiming his sword at the chest of the hated enemy. And again a miss. Again he cut the air. Again, in some incredible way, the one to whose death he had fled with all his might disappeared. The Prince left him alone with the terrible truth. Sowing doubt is the main talent of the vizier. The prince knelt down, extinguishing his impotent anger. Perhaps the vizier was right in something. The realization of this made its way into the Prince's mind in small sprouts, making him think. But his thoughts were immediately interrupted by Farah's words.

"Come on, get up!" You didn't choose the best time to—" she said, pausing in mid-sentence.

"Yes, you are right," the Prince replied to her.

He would have been indignant at other times, but now he was glad that Farah had so unceremoniously interrupted his thoughts. They were too burdensome and really untimely.

Meanwhile, Essen got up with difficulty and approached them. He rubbed his side and shoulder: he hit them as he fell. But it didn't bother him that much. It was felt that he was tense, but the reason

for that was what he heard. Now the pieces of the puzzle were in his head, and he knew that the Prince and Farah were not saying much. And, apparently, the Prince was directly involved in what happened. And something needs to be done about it. Perhaps now is not the best moment: Essen is weakened, and even an attempt to take possession of the dagger or put up other resistance may not end well for him. Immersed in these thoughts, he stood gloomily a little to the side, watching this strange couple, and was silent.

"I think we should go." He can come back," Farah said.

"Yes," said the Prince, and stood up. -Got to go. We must not give up!

"No one is going to give up!" Farah answered him.

-Correct... Farah, what did he do to you? The Prince asked a little confused.

-Hit. Headlight showed him a large scratch on his arm, from which blood was oozing. "Then for some reason he grabbed my hand, and then he just disappeared.

"And how are you, Essen?" The Prince asked, tearing a piece of cloth from his sleeve and bandaging Farah's wound.

-That's all right. I can walk, and that's good," Essen replied sternly, holding his head.

-What is this? Farah asked suddenly, bending down for some reason. Everyone saw her picking up a book from the floor. She was soft, covered with brown skin, and you could see from her that she was very old.

Turning the find in her hands, she handed it to the Prince.

"It must have been accidentally dropped by the vizier," the Prince decided.

He opened it and examined the yellow pages, cracked at the edges. Instantly, the smell of paper mixed with the smell of leather cover was felt in the air. On the pages was written something in an incomprehensible language, unfamiliar to the Prince. The handwriting clearly belonged to one person, but somewhere the words were written slowly and accurately, and somewhere hastily and unevenly. For some reason, the prince imagined himself for a second in the role of a man writing on these pages, seeing them empty in front of him and his (or not his) hand holding a pen, and this made him dizzy for a second.

"What does it say?" Farah asked.

"I don't know, nothing is clear here!" The prince turned the pages towards his companions so that they could get a better look. "It's a familiar way of writing, but it's clearly not Persian.

"I don't even know such letters," Farah said disappointedly. "These pages look so ancient...

The prince closed the book and turned it over in his hands in disappointment, thought for a couple of seconds and put it in his pocket. Perhaps it would come in handy later, but for now it was completely useless to him.

"We must go immediately. Essen, do you know the shortcut to the Tower of Dawn? Can you guide us? The Prince asked.

-I'll help you. Just to get rid of it all. If I see you afterward, you'll be worse," Essen's tone was clearly threatening. He decided to indicate his position by showing the Prince his mood. The Bactrian really had a hard time deciding to help the Prince and Farah. "I heard what that old man said!" And you are no less to blame for everything that happened.

The prince made no reply, and silence reigned. Something was spinning on his tongue about gratitude for saving Essen's life, but it never took the form of words. Essen's behavior even somewhat outraged the Prince. Headlight literally felt the tension that hung in the air. Essen himself also thought that cooperation with Farah and the Prince is now the lesser evil, despite all the "buts". In addition, the Prince (at least for now) has a dagger, and he is really good at fighting.

"We have to go there," Essen finally said, pointing to the door at the end of the hall.

Chapter 16. Jatta

The first thing Ajit wanted, when he felt that he was still alive, was to call Asha, which he did:

-Asha! A hoarse moan escaped from his throat. He couldn't scream. Any movement caused him pain. My head was spinning, and my temples were pounding.

Barely able to control himself, Ajit sat up and tried to open his eyelids. After a while, he realized that it was useless to wait for an answer - the memories of what had happened returned to him. He didn't remember when... or rather, he did not know how long he had been lying here, on the verge of life and death. Death, which called him into its cold embrace, and life, which did not want to give him into these hands and fought desperately for him. He now felt the consequences of this struggle with his whole body. Ajit felt something preventing him from breathing. He ran his hand over his face, felt that something was left on it, and tried to examine it. Vainly. Only huge shapeless spots flashed before his eyes, among which he could not even see his own hand. The only thing he could make out was that it was dark, he knew for sure. So it was still night and he hadn't been here that long. A sharp burning pain in his head did not let him forget about himself for a second, making him shudder from time to time. Ajit exhaled sharply through his nose and felt the taste of his own blood on his lips. He tried to get to his feet, still not seeing anything. His attempt was doomed to failure from the beginning, and he collapsed to the ground again, his back resting on the stones of the road that had cooled down during the night. He tried to stand up again, leaning on his hands, and again he failed: he was too weak.

Sometimes life can be incredibly cruel. As much as there is not even death. For a dying person, death is salvation, deliverance from torment and suffering, if he has already resigned himself to the inevitability and is ready to break with life. But she continues to torment him, does not want to let go. And at the very moment when a person has already soaked in death, recognized its smell, tasted it, life jerks him back in its direction with a sharp and rough jerk, as if mocking and apologizing at the same time, giving him a breath of fresh air and new hope.

So he lay there, staring blankly upwards, until the darkness before his eyes began to turn into silvery moonlight, into individual brightly twinkling stars and leaves swaying in the wind.

The whispers they made soothed Ajit, who still had a nightmare in his mind. I wonder if he will ever forget it? And will it end at all? And if it ends, then how? What has life in store for him? And how long will it last?

Suddenly, the silence of the night was broken by a sharp cry, like a bird's. Ajit could hardly think, but it seemed to him that it sounded somewhere in the sky, on the side opposite the palace. He turned his head, but could not see anything. He still saw only the sky and the high vaults of the castle. It seemed truly huge to Ajit now, he felt like a pitiful ant compared to this huge block of stone growing right out of the ground.

He still felt like he couldn't get up. What should he do? Is it easy to lie here and wait for his strength to return? No! He didn't want to put up with it! What's wrong with Asha now? Is the princess alive? What else was terrible due to the fault of Peski? He remembered the vizier. No wonder he seemed so suspicious to Ajit. He was always up to something. Especially then, on the Island. And now, it seems, he managed to carry out his plans.

Ajit's thoughts were suddenly disturbed by a loud, incomprehensible sound. He raised his head and was stunned with surprise. In front of his eyes, a huge monster, the one that had almost killed him just recently, lifted off the ground in an attempt to get up, but as if exhausted, it collapsed heavily back to the ground.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Ajit in his mind.

He really didn't understand what was happening. A few minutes ago, as it seemed to him, he did not feel the time that he had been unconscious, this mighty beast had so much strength that it could easily tear it to shreds. And now he is almost weaker than him! Ajit was confused. And what if he got up and finished off the beast? But he was just as weak himself. And what happened after all? Ajit tried to build a chain of events that had happened, but he could not cling to anything. He remembered how he fell to the ground and everything around him darkened. And nothing else. Absolutely nothing.

The monster stirred again. This time he managed to get up, and quite easily. Ajit immediately said goodbye to the idea of revenge. He was seized with terror again. What was the point of being one step away from death like this, breathing a little more life and dying again? But now it is finally and irrevocably.

The already familiar heavy footsteps were heard, reminiscent of the clink of metal on stone. Ajit jerked up his hand, threw it over his chest, and felt for the locket. He's still here. Whole. True. And now he will be gone. Or rather, both of them. Ajit unclenched his fingers, relaxed his hand, and let it slide to the ground. He saw the beast's head bowed above him, a pair of white, far-set eyes. They were without pupils, the light in them burst out from somewhere inside, but even from these eyes you could read everything. They were not seen as cruelty, not a desire to kill and take away the medallion. There was some interest in them. As if this is not a beast at all, but a

man. Or still a beast that has found a soul. Or maybe a person who has lost his body.

Under this gaze, Ajit lost his will. He couldn't resist it, even if he had the strength, so he just waited to see what would happen. He already felt that he trusted this look. Not to the monster, but to his eyes. This incomprehensible light was oozing out of them, impregnated with something... Friends, relatives and truly acquaintances. The fear of death had receded, and Ajit no longer felt the chill that had chilled him to the bone the last time. He even felt some warmth, very weak, but still warm.

Ajit suddenly remembered his youth. His best friend then was a dog. Large, with long white hair, she came from nowhere. Ajit fed her his lunch when she returned to him. He remembered perfectly well her hot tongue, which licked his hands and face as a sign of devotion and gratitude. And he remembered how one day the dog simply did not come to him. And then the whole next week. And she never appeared again at all. Suspecting something was wrong, Ajit walked the streets almost all day, looking into every corner, looking for a friend. I called him. He remembered his despair. Despair... How many times had he experienced it in his life? And which time was the strongest? Maybe the one when he, having already stopped searching, simply sat down on the ground, leaned his back against the wall of some house, clasped his head in his knees and did not know how to live further? Now, of course, all this seemed childishly naïve to him, but then it was a real shock for him, a shock from which he could not recover for a long time. And along with all these memories, he saw the light of the beast's eyes and continued to trust him. He wanted to touch it if he could.

But instead, he felt the beast touch him. Ajit heard the sword he had dropped glide across the scabbard. No matter how much he reached for those eyes, it surprised him greatly. Why would the beast care so much about him? And then even more amazing happened: instead of touching the locket, taking it and killing Ajit, the monster took him in his arms and slowly walked along the wall of the majestic palace with him.

The monster was quite clumsy, and every step hurt Ajit, but he endured. He endured in silence. He felt hope growing in him again. The executioner turned into a savior. Maybe all this chaos will turn into paradise?

They walked like this for a few minutes, then turned somewhere to the left, into the palace: Ajit noticed that he could no longer see the sky, but instead of it, the dark walls inside the palace and occasionally the red spots of torches on the walls. He could smell a familiar, though long-forgotten smell. A few more minutes passed

before he realized that it was Peski. The same stale, oppressive and dusty air as on the Island.

The beast that had been walking all this time without making a single sound, sometimes bent down to squeeze through the next door - it was really huge. And then in one of the small rooms he finally stopped. Ajit felt something soft touch his body. He was suddenly seized by even greater fatigue, stronger than he had been when he was lying on the rocks. The beast laid him on a soft bed, as if caring for him as if he were his own son. But he was already barely aware of this and only realized that he was about to fall into the abyss of deep sleep.

What happened next, Ajit no longer saw. And probably if a hundred cannons had been fired over his ear, he would not have heard.

The beast, after standing for a few seconds, as if in thought, turned and stepped down the steps that led to the bed, down and stopped again, gazing intently into the darkness, as if something was about to jump out of it. But the monster's face did not betray concern, which meant that he was sure of what would happen next. It was the face, and not the bestial face that Asha and Ajit saw, that acquired the awareness and calmness inherent in a confident person. As if this is not a monster at all, but a person who has fallen into the cage of an animal body.

Even the keenest eye probably would not have seen how, in a couple of seconds, a barely visible white ghostly spot burst out of the darkness, which was especially thick outside the entrance to the room, and slowly floated towards the beast - it stood without moving, only carefully watching this transparent cloud. It did not move quickly, about the speed of a human step, leaving behind strange swirls in the air that gave the air a slightly orange hue. All this happened in absolute silence, which made the picture look incredibly mysterious and a little frightening. A frightening unknown. Absolutely no one would have been able to correctly explain what was happening if someone had been watching him. Not having reached about twenty paces, the cloud suddenly accelerated and, being very close to the monster, seemed to jump into it. A second of absolute silence and darkness. Even the monster's white eyes seemed to have dimmed, so much so that they could not be found in the darkness. And a sharp bright flash of white light. The light came from the beast itself: from the furrows in the skin, nostrils, eyes, and a mouth open in a silent scream, raised to the ceiling.

The room, the walls of which were made of white marble, but in some places hung with large sheets of fabric, was illuminated by a light that in an instant cut and tore to shreds all the darkness. The glow was simply blinding. The long shadows of the jugs and the bed

on which Ajit slept were almost indistinguishable. Then darkness again. Or rather, it was already semi-darkness: something else illuminated the room with a soft gray light, which made it possible to catch the outlines of what was around. The face and skin of the beast were almost extinguished, the light remained only in the eyes. A heavy step was heard, followed by another - from the unexpected force that burst into the beast, it seemed to weaken and step back. And then he even sat down on one knee. But there was still no fear or incomprehension in his eyes. He resembled a patient who drank medicine, knowing in advance that for a few minutes he would feel even worse, but then relief would come.

This strange gray light was oozing from the beast itself, in the form of smoke that flowed out of its skin and slowly dissipated everywhere like mist. Seconds passed, but the beast did not move. Then the silence was broken by heavy breathing - the monster was breathing as if for the first time in his life. He had been breathing before, but this time in a special way, as if he was suffocating and trying to suck in more air before something.

Suddenly, the silence of the night was broken by the roar of the giant, remaining in the same position, on his knee, he spread his arms to the sides and lifted his face and chest up. The beast continued to breathe heavily, and its chest heaved sharply from these sighs, and it seemed that something inside it was trying to tear it apart.

The roar was really loud, it seemed that even the walls shook, and the echo flew somewhere away, as if trying to wake up everyone who might be sleeping that night. But Ajit did not hear this either, his sleep was much stronger. Sleep caused by fatigue is much deeper than usual. Especially when you remember that Ajit had fallen asleep for real for the first time in the last few days. Often, at night, on the days when he and Asha walked through the desert, he woke up, sat by the fire and looked at the fire for a long time, admiring how it ate the wood, turning it into coals, ashes and hundreds of burning dust particles, flying up and shining for a few seconds in the night like stars. While Asha slept peacefully, his sleep much stronger after being wounded, Ajit was all alone, except for the crescent moon silently watching him. He tried not to think about anything: neither about the past, nor about the present, nor about the future - thoughts about anything brought either pain or disappointment. Or both at the same time. He had lost his old life, he had lost it like sand through his fingers. And he threw these ruins, this huge ashes, without hoping to revive or return anything. He did not find another life, his real life is this fire, this desert, and nothing else. And his companion. Asha - who is he? His friend? Just a random companion with whom they chased an almost unattainable goal together, with almost no chance

of success? This risk could only be justified by the fact that they had nothing else to do. It is better to run somewhere, barely catching one's breath, than to sit still and, abandoning all aspirations, give way to despondency.

In his dream now, Ajit saw himself walking somewhere on the low grass, the sun gently warming his back. He didn't feel the pain enveloping his body. I didn't feel it, because it wasn't there. There was no fatigue, fear and anxiety. Everything seemed very easy to him. And he himself was as light as the wind that gently rustled the grass at his feet. The most pleasant feeling he experienced was calmness. Ajit was sure that he would go on and on. He was not afraid of this long monotonous path, on the contrary, he was pleasant. He wanted to feel forever the warmth of the setting sun, painting the huge field in a slightly reddish color, to breathe in the fresh air brought by the wind from afar. And with him was his old friend - the same lost dog. She walked slowly, like him, into the distance, without leaving him, her long white fur fluttering in the wind.

The beast got up from its knees and walked towards Ajit. Now his face flashed with rage again, and the mysterious light disappeared from his eyes. A little closer to Ajit than the monster was, a silvery-white cloud glittered in the air, only, unlike the first one, some threads fluttered around it, which, in addition to its mystery, also gave it a splendor that could be admired for an incredibly long time.

Ahead of the maddened beast again, the cloud rushed towards Ajit, as if it had jumped into the air above him, hovered for a second, and, turning into the thinnest and lightest blanket, lay softly on the sleeper, throwing small white sparks with the tips of the threads. As soon as the cloud touched the warrior, the room lit up with a bright flash of white light, turning it into something unbelievable, out of this world. The walls that bounded her floated somewhere, gradually melting into thin air. All objects were stretched, turning into the same clouds, their edges trembled and sometimes disappeared.

The beast, which had been walking confidently before, suddenly stopped, not understanding what had happened. He didn't care what was going on in the room or with her. He didn't know where Ajit had gone. A second ago, he had been in front of him and suddenly disappeared.

Suddenly, the monster turned sharply, as if hearing a sharp sound or smelling something. Almost without hesitation, he went to the exit. This time, there was more aggression in his steps, the impact of his feet on the stone floor became heavier, and their sound was even more metallic. He walked confidently as before - it seemed that he was always confident in his business, as if he had a special

sense of smell or all his actions were prescribed by someone in advance. He had no trouble finding a way out and walking through it, despite the fact that reality was almost absent here: it melted away and was carried away along with everything that was in this room and herself. And as soon as the beast crossed the threshold, everything suddenly took its shape in an instant and returned to normal. Ajit was still asleep.

In his dream, he suddenly, unexpectedly for himself and much to his chagrin, saw Jatta—he finally remembered the name of the dog—rush forward at the invisible enemy, leaving Ajit. This invisible enemy... it disturbed his sleep, his last hope of rest from everything. Even here, Ajit could not find the peace he needed so much. But he was not alone. Jatta was with him, saving him from the enemy, she could save what he needed.

The weightless blanket that hid Ajit from the monster's view soared into the air, rendering him defenseless again, and shifted its shape to the floor in silent flight. It never made a single sound at all, had no smell. And, probably, no one could see him. If Ajit had opened his eyes now, he would not have seen anything. Does what is now next to him really exist? If it was able to protect, then it certainly exists. Invisible to people and having the ability to resist the Sands. That monster that had just left the room couldn't be driven by anything but the Sands.

Right in the world of people, unnoticed by them, there is another confrontation going on. It is not at all like wars between people, it does not look like the struggle of surviving people and sand monsters. Rather, it is a pursuit of a single goal, and the only thing that matters is who can get to it first. And people often do not notice what is happening right under their noses.

The whistle of an arrow flying out of the darkness drove the silence out of the room. It was unleashed on Ajit and had to do in a second what the monster hadn't been able to do in the last hour or two. But this was not destined to happen again: the cloud rushed towards the arrow, taking on the shape of a dog as it ran, and then jumped into the air, meeting the shot with its chest. Not a drop of blood spurted from the animal's body. It didn't let out a cry of pain. Instead, the arrow that was confidently flying towards its victim melted inside her, turning into golden dust that flew out of the dog's back. With her body, she simply destroyed it, if you can call this translucent mirage a body. But nevertheless, her appearance was worthy of admiration: dazzling white long hair, sharp, elongated muzzle, eyes in which you could read wisdom and courage, inspiring respect.

The wind couldn't get that far into the palace, but her fur still fluttered, making it look like a mirage was about to melt. But it did

not disappear, but smashed another arrow with its body. And then another one. Until the one who shot stepped out of the darkness. A sand monster, very different from the others, with long, here and there torn hair, in armor, with a huge bow on his back and an equally huge saber in his hands. His movements were more conscious than those of other monsters. This one was more perfect and did not blindly succumb to the simple instinct of killing. Although, in the end, his goal was exactly the same as that of the others - to take the lives of the survivors. Or maybe he also wanted to take away the locket. And maybe it's no coincidence that such a special warrior was sent to kill Ajit? But by whom was he sent? The soldier is the vizier's servant, therefore, he was sent by him. But how could he know about Ajit? About the fact that he has a medallion? Perhaps someone could have denounced, but he and Asha destroyed everyone who met on their way. And the blind killers would not run away, having the opportunity to fulfill their goal. These monsters were not afraid for their lives - they simply did not have it.

The monster appreciated his surroundings and almost recklessly rushed towards the dog. In those few steps, his eyes flashed much brighter. Then a poisonous yellow light slid over his body and over his sword, as if setting it on fire and turning it into a torch that lit up the room in addition to pale gray, but also yellow. A room that began to melt and lose its shape again. Wall after wall turned to dust, and the dog and the monster were transported to this new world.

The first blow of the sword whistled through the air, barely catching the dog's fur and dropping a few shreds to the floor. Or rather, where he was - there was nothing but bottomless emptiness and white fog around. Dodging the blow, the dog immediately rushed towards the monster and grabbed his arm with all his might, causing the sword to fall out of it. But the monster didn't roar in pain even when its hand separated from its body—it didn't feel anything. Sand began to ooze from his hand, turning the white mist into golden yellow. The dust was scattered away in different directions. But the dog was still ready to rush at the enemy again, at any second, as if he had not left, although his sword and scraps of ammunition had vanished into thin air.

But the dust that had been spreading to the sides suddenly began to gather back, swirling around one point in a whirlwind, gradually condensing and uniting into a kind of cloud that looked like a disembodied spirit. Another minute passed, during which the dog sat motionless and watched what was happening. The dust was becoming more and more shaped, and the outlines of the head and arms could be seen, although the legs were not visible: the sand creature floated in the air, and only a long cassock hung down. Suddenly, somewhere behind him, several more monsters appeared,

looking just like this a few minutes ago. But they also crumbled into dust on the run and, as if picked up by the wind, flew to the sand cloud as if caught by the wind, making it less and less transparent and giving its outlines even more clarity. And cruelty to himself. Gaining strength, the sand spirit rushed into battle. He didn't have a sword now. But where the opponents were now determined by a completely different type of weapon. Sharp iron will not solve anything, no matter how powerful it is.

With his hands pressed to him and his head bowed, the monster threw a whirlwind of sand of great force directly at the dog, causing him to step back. Her fur fluttered in all directions from the strongest wind, her muzzle was tilted slightly down so that the dust would not get clogged in her eyes. But this wasn't what the sand monster expected. This meant that his opponent was much stronger than he thought. If his eyes were visible on his face now, then they would be fiercely narrowed as he unleashed a vortex with triple strength. The bristling dog met this blow with dignity. The animal was going to keep the killers away from Ajit at all costs. Slowly walking against the raging stream, the dog suddenly flashed with a dazzling white light, which in an instant destroyed the raging elements and stopped the enemy. It resembled fire. White fire. Tongues of snow-white flame, scattering silver sparks everywhere, but not burning anything and not poisoning the air with smoke, but only barely stirring it.

Ajit stood motionless and watched what was happening. He wanted to help his friend, but he could not move. Jatta attacked a strange man in a cloak with a hood thrown over, who was very nearby. Ajit knew that this stranger did not belong here in his dream, in the only place where all peace belonged to him alone, that he was an enemy whose intentions contained only evil. He had no right to cast his shadow on this grass. He had no right to take away the last shelter from a tired wanderer. The man tried to fight back, but he had to step back. And there was almost nothing he could do about it. Suddenly, Ajit felt a slight surge of strength and raised his hand towards the sun, as if invoking its power, and waved abruptly in the direction of the stranger. The sun flashed a hundred times brighter, and in an instant, the light chased the stranger away, causing him to melt into thin air. In his mind, Ajit was now filled with gratitude to his faithful friend, who seemed to have just saved his life and peace. And he himself only struck the decisive blow.

Where the dog and the monster were, suddenly, instead of a mere void, there were tall stone columns, square in shape, on which long furrows decorated with ornate protrusions were carved. The columns ran skyward, crashing into the majestic vaults of the hall, which gradually acquired a floor made of large triangular pieces of marble.

The monster was not going to give up and let out a wild scream, which echoed deafeningly through the hall. Behind him, another one. And then billions of grains of sand rushed, merged into one mad stream, which flew across the hall, entangled the columns and squeezed and broke them. But they did not just collapse. They collapsed over time - at first small pieces flew off from them, then branchy cracks ran from the bottom to the ceiling. Time sped up for them a thousand times, and before their eyes they became decrepit and crumbling. And finally, what the monster was waiting for happened: one of the pillars broke off from the base and began to fall down like a fallen tree. As if echoing it and submitting to the same inexorably fast flow of time, the second one began to collapse. And behind them, a dozen more columns began to fall. A grandiose spectacle was taking place around the white dog. But, in spite of everything, it was destruction, and it was not worthy of real admiration.

The whirlwinds that were squeezing the huge boulders were now directing their fall precisely at the dog. She slowly closed her eyes and lowered her head. But, as it turned out a second later, not as a sign of submission or resignation to defeat. It was an attempt to draw from herself a great power, which was embodied in a second flash, even stronger than the previous one. It was so powerful that it once again dissipated the flow of Sand and stopped the falling columns, and then reversed their movement and returned the time taken from them. They again became like new and put themselves in their places. The light that burned everything around seemed to be touchable - it was so thick and strong. And before the monster had time to come to his senses, he saw that his opponent was running towards him. He runs, forcefully pressing the floor slabs into the ground. The monster tried again, whirlwinds bursting out of the ground like geysers, throwing slabs upward, but Defender Ajit ran faster and faster no matter what, even if she had to run over triangular rocks flying in the air. With a last desperately strong jerk, the dog reached the enemy and plunged his body into him like a sharp blade. This blow stopped the monster in an instant, making it impossible for it to move and resist. Long cracks crept over it, yellow dust flying out of it, and the last thing he did was let out another scream. But not pain, but rage. Blind and completely useless. Then it exploded, and in the white flames, the dust burned in less than a second.

The dog flew out of the monster's back. At this moment, she didn't have her own eyes. They were... Human. But a second passed, and the animal blinked, and the eyes were hers again.

She coped. She did. The owner would be pleased. She learned a lot from him.

When she turned, the old reality was already coming into its own, the room had become a room again, and everything else had melted away as if nothing had happened. The dog approached Ajit and licked his palm. And immediately it melted into the air like a morning mist.

Ajit bent down and gently stroked his faithful friend. For the last time, I enjoyed the beauty of the sun, the green grass, the magnificent mighty clouds, reddened from the sunset, which in some places covered the same magnificent blue sky, and... Woke up.

Chapter 17. Asha

Asha ran farther and farther away from where he and Ajit had been attacked by the monster. First along the palace wall, then turned left and went deeper into the palace. When he felt that he could hardly run, he stopped and listened. It seemed to him that he would remember these heavy steps for the rest of his life, from which his whole body shivered. And even when he imagined this sound in his mind, Asha felt goosebumps running down his spine. And immediately he remembered the terrible cold that blew from the monster, which made him feel that it was somewhere nearby, and his mind drew a monster from every random shadow in fear. But as soon as he listened closely, he realized that there was no one around. Asha stood alone in the whisper of leaves under the glow of fading stars - dawn was approaching.

He had lost a friend, and now he did not know what to do. He had no friends in his life, he had always been used to relying on himself and was confident in himself, but in the few days that he had known Ajit, something unusual had happened: he had found a friend and, unbeknownst to himself, had become so attached to him that he had betrayed his old principles. Ajit was older and wiser than him, and despite his ardor, the young man trusted him and followed him. Now he is dead. Hope - is it still there? Does it still live in Asha's heart, or has he lost it? But something was leading him forward! If fear—he would never admit it to himself—had possessed him completely, he would have simply left the city. It was not difficult: they left their horses there, at the gate, outside the city wall. And he could easily find his way back. But he suddenly remembered what had happened to the man who had tried to leave the city—he had crumbled into dust. And it seemed to Asha that they were very similar now and the same fate awaited him. So there was a way forward, through darkness and horror, but with hope. She would live as long as he lived.

Something else moved Asha. It was curiosity. He wanted to understand everything that was happening, he felt some special, incomprehensible mystery. Something grandiose happened that night. And maybe something even more incredible awaits him next? He even thought of going back, but he knew he had no chance: Ajit had taught him caution. The way forward didn't bode well either: what if something worse happened? The suspense teased him, keeping him in suspense. Sometimes so much so that he cursed Ajit, the one he had called his friend a moment ago, for not having time to explain anything to him. But he definitely knew something, and, for sure, a lot. Enough to know what to do next. Asha didn't know, and that was what worried him.

Suddenly, the young man was frightened - nothing around him contributed to this, it was still quiet and calm, but it suddenly seemed to him that... He thinks too loudly. His thoughts ran like a swarm of bees in his head, and he remembered what had happened recently. The sand monster heard his and Ajit's thoughts, and without difficulty, without seeing them, found them. And what if someone already hears it? But instead of trying to calm down and put his thoughts in order, Asha became even more excited.

In the east, it was beginning to get lighter - the sun was getting closer and closer to the edge of the horizon to finally save the world from the darkness of the night. Asha was inwardly happy about this, knowing that it would be easier this way. He stopped again and looked around.

If I want to do anything, I have to figure out where I am first, Asha thought to himself.

To his left stretched a high fence of metal pointed rods, which rested in the distance against the wall of some tower. On the right stood a low building, unlike the palace, but still majestic in its own way, with two staircases at the edges leading to the second floor, and one main door, on either side of which hung two sheets of green cloth with yellow stripes. The canvases were inscribed at the bottom with some words, at the top there was a large symbol that looked like a crescent moon. Along the entire building, carved columns half protruded from the wall, resembling ropes twisted into a rope.

Asha, although indecisive, went to the building - he wanted to know what was inside. He knew that he should have found another entrance to the palace, but he had not yet been able to do so: in all the time he had fled, he had never seen anything like it. Therefore, Asha had no choice but to enter the building in front of him. According to his guesses, it resembled the main building of the barracks, from where the soldiers of the city were managed and commanded - something similar was in Kashi. Perhaps inside he will understand where to go next. Maybe the prison where the prisoners are held will be somewhere nearby? That last thought cheered him up.

The main gate, wide enough for five or six columns of soldiers to pass through, was closed. Asha strode to the right staircase, trying to walk as quietly as possible, as if it could save him.

Still carefully and slowly, but already purposefully, he climbed the steps, holding on to the railing with his hand. His concentration prevented him from noticing the beauty around him. It began with the sweet morning air, flowed into the gentle rustle of grass and leaves, and the crown of this beauty was a timid dawn, which, although it did not break the silence, was able to break the

monotonous thick darkness, gave everything its own true color and illuminated the dewdrops.

Asha only noticed that it was getting a little cooler. And immediately after that, he entered the building, opening a half-open door. The air was warmer here. Asha found himself in a small room, on the opposite side of which there was another exactly the same door, and on the side walls there were exactly the same banners as at the entrance. Light was oozing from the windows above the front door and on the right wall, but it was still quite dark. Asha walked through the room and opened the second door. It creaked treacherously, and he froze in place, listening. But all he heard was the beating of his own heart. Excitement surged over him, as if putting a hand to his throat and squeezing his breath. Nothing happened. The creak of the door quickly disappeared somewhere in the depths of the corridor that lay just behind her. Asha pulled the doorknob further towards him, causing the hinge to make another sound, even longer and louder than the first. Asha took a few steps and, listening again, looked around. To the left and straight into the distance ran two long corridors with yellowish stone walls and sparsely set windows, through which the dawn threw a light that dispelled the twilight. At the corner closest to the Indian, a large torch was stuck in the mount, but it did not burn, although it was clear from the rather thick smoke that it had recently gone out. But there was no one to light it. Iron lamps hung from the ceiling, some still had a crackling fire, but many had already gone out. And after them, the others slowly faded away.

Dead silence reigned around, the air was filled with horror. Asha slowly moved down the corridor away from the door. To his left were doors in the wall, some of them ajar. Asha looked into small cracks - behind them there were different rooms - some very small, others more like small halls. But he did not dare to touch any of the doors: the desire not to make a single superfluous sound still possessed him.

Passing by another room, the Indian noticed that the door was wide open. Carefully, holding the hilt of his sword - he did this without thinking about whether ordinary weapons would help him against these monsters, just out of habit - he walked inside the room. It turned out to be quite small, and it looked like the room of some military commander. In the center was a table, and on it lay a sheet of paper with a large pen, from which an ink stain spread, smeared by someone's hand on the sheet. The chair was overturned, an arrow sticking out of the wall behind it. Asha looked at the table, at the paper - at one point. On a stain. And on an unfinished, smeared page. Turning slightly, he saw the murdered Bactrian lying in the corner. He was pierced by a pair of exactly the same arrows, like the one in the wall. He had a sword in his hand, perhaps he had snatched it

before he died. He even managed to survive the first attempt to kill him. But the Bactrian commander could not achieve more.

Gripped by gloomy feelings again, Asha left the room and quickly walked further down the corridor. Again, it seemed to him that the monsters were somewhere very close. They can easily appear right out of thin air, out of nowhere. But now there was anger mixed in with all this, which, as it seemed to him, made him ready for battle. He no longer paid attention to the noise he was making, and as he left the room, he caught a candelabra that clanked on the floor, reverberating the hum throughout the corridor. Rage and grief divided the Indian in half, supplanting reason and caution.

He quickly reached the end of the corridor and, opening another door, found himself in a small room similar to the one through which he had entered the building. A little more carefully, but with almost the same speed, he opened the second door, which was the exit. Behind him lay a ladder, along which Asha rushed down.

Running down the stairs, the young man met a breath of breeze, which at first made him feel a slight coolness, and a second later brought a pleasant aroma to him. Something he was missing... Meal! He hadn't eaten normally for so long. Inhaling the smell again, he felt weakness in his legs and pain in his stomach.

"It's strange," thought Asha, "a minute ago I didn't understand or feel any of this."

There were several other buildings around him, looking simpler than the one he ran out of. Asha immediately guessed: these were barracks. The courtyard was equipped for training soldiers, and the smell of food wafted from the soldiers' canteen. All this was familiar to him firsthand. Perhaps finding himself in a somewhat familiar place made him feel a little calmer.

He turned right and walked to the nearest building. The entrance to it was open. The building itself was one-story, but when Asha went inside, he found that the floor was lowered below the ground and there was another staircase descending from the entrance to the floor. Inside, it was larger than it seemed from the outside, the ceiling was propped up by several round columns. The stone from which everything inside was made had a slightly bluish tint, and in the semi-darkness, which had not yet been completely dispelled by the light of dawn that gushed from the windows, the building of the soldiers' canteen seemed blue. Long wooden tables were placed in neat rows below, and on either side of them were the same long benches. Some of them were shifted or inverted. Asha went down the stairs and approached the tables. Not noticing anything unusual around, the young man switched to the tables themselves. The pleasant aroma beckoned him, distracted him from everything and drew him to himself.

Plates with some kind of soup were placed on the table, in which pieces of meat were floating. Some plates were overturned or even thrown to the floor. Asha grabbed one of the wooden spoons lying on the table, and, scooping up the soup with it, greedily swallowed it. He was cold - the first thing that Asha noticed. The second thing he noticed was that he didn't care about it at all. The taste, which he had almost forgotten in the midst of all that had happened, whetted a brutal appetite in him. But, in addition to this, another dangerous feeling has settled in the Indian - excessive confidence. In short, it could be described as follows: everything that happened is already in the past. Nothing else will happen.

But in fact, everything was just beginning. Disarmed, Asha was now extremely vulnerable. And not only for the monsters that could pounce on him at any second, if they were nearby, but also for everything that could subdue him. Like the Sands, who took advantage of ordinary human weakness now and almost held their victim at the edge of the abyss. But what is beyond the edge of this abyss? Death? Or a completely different abyss?

The taste of meat gave Asha a surge of energy. And at the same time, it made him feel a little drowsy, which made him see everything in a slightly different light now. Clearer than usual, but without seeing the most obvious: he is alone and he is a victim. And where his executioner was hiding, Asha did not even know. But a person who has ignorance has his own weapons - intuition and luck. One in a million who smiles at him in the dark, helping him find his way. And, as if knowing this, Asha continued to eat.

Suddenly, somewhere there was a clink of metal on stone. Behind it, another and another, each louder than the previous one. Asha froze and instantly forgot about the food. The first thought that flashed through his mind:

"Now he's coming for me!"

Why he was so sure that this was the same monster that killed Ajit, and why he was going after him, he did not even think: this thought burned in him instinctively. The feeling of anxiety returned to him even faster than he could have imagined, and the strongest of the fears he had experienced took possession of him. This fear had a quite clear, memorable image. As if he became a little familiar, which means that because of this, you can be less afraid of him. This is the insidiousness of some fears - they convince us that we have learned them and are no longer afraid. In fact, they are the ones who study us better, looking for weaknesses.

A few seconds of silence. They irritated with a false calm, increasing the excitement.

Suddenly something happened that would have confused anyone. Especially Ash, who expected anything, but not like this. He

could see perfectly well through the elongated windows the solar disk, more than half rising from the horizon - the dining room was on a hill, above the wall surrounding the palace, so it was easy to see the line between heaven and earth. And right before his eyes, the sun crept up faster than usual. Much faster. A few seconds, and a trembling red drop is already breaking off from the edge of the ground and creeping upward, lighting up brighter, yellowing and losing its red color.

In this way, the sun sailed in about ten seconds about half of its usual day's journey and stopped. Asha, amazed, could not believe his eyes. This sight struck him even more strongly than the ray of light that descended on the palace from heaven. Now something completely unnatural has happened. But it happened so easily and imperceptibly that it seemed natural. A crazy change in such an ordinary and familiar world!

A few more seconds of immobility. Not a sound, not a sigh. As if all nature was discouraged no less than the Indian himself and tried to enter a new channel. Soon, Asha felt a much stronger light shining through the windows, bringing with it the midday heat instead of the coolness that reigned here.

Still not believing his own eyes, Asha stepped back - it was too unbearable to stand under the blinding light. If he didn't understand anything before, now it was as if he didn't understand even more. Everything went beyond the ordinary, allowed by the normal order of things, even his own surprise. And it was not completely under his control, nor were his thoughts. Perhaps someone was constantly eavesdropping on him, and he couldn't even do anything about it!

Asha turned. What was happening defied any explanation. And there was no time to think - he needed to run away from this place as soon as possible. Probably the strangest of those that Asha managed to see in the entire palace. But before he could take a few steps, he found several huge stones collapse to the floor in the place where the entrance was, completely closing the opening. Prison... He found himself in prison, the most unusual he thought he could imagine. The only thing missing was the prison guard.

For a few seconds, it seemed to him that his heart had stopped beating and that someone else was in control of his mind. The one who turned him around and made him take a few steps back. When he came to his senses, he realized that he was standing in front of another large stone that had come off the ceiling. A bright sunspot burned on it. The Indian stretched out his hand and touched a piece of stone - it had not yet had time to heat up.

And again something happened that Asha did not expect at all: from the place where he put his hand, cracks ran along the stone, it began to change its color to a lifeless gray, crumbling and chipping at

the edges, eaten by time. Like a disease that jumped from a stone to the floor, to the stairs behind Asha, ran along the walls and, finally, perched on the ceiling, taking away from everything around him year after year in a matter of seconds. The gap at the top widened, and now the sun flooded the dining room almost entirely. However, the stones at the entrance still did not allow Asha to leave, faithfully keeping his guard.

Asha looked up - he could get out of this split. But how? He didn't have a rope, and there was no one to throw it down from there, from above. Suddenly, quite unexpectedly for himself, he remembered Ajit. And then he felt dizzy - at first he imagined himself in his place for a second, felt the taste of death, and then realized that his friend had died. I realized it again, much deeper. Then these thoughts mixed, tearing the Indian's consciousness in two.

Perhaps they could have taken possession of him, continuing to deprive him of his sanity and faith, if not for the sudden sound of a strange bang behind him, which instantly sobered Asha up. He turned around and realized that everything that had happened to him was really just the beginning. The beginning of the end. The monster was approaching him quite quickly, greedily biting at him with the gaze of predatory yellow eyes.

"Die without shame!" - a brief thought flashed in Asha's head and gave him a kind of plan of action.

He drew his sword and deflected the monster's first powerful blow. It was no taller than Asha, so the young man did not feel absolutely desperate. If not the chances of winning, then he had a chance of resistance. An opportunity to fight for his life, to try to prove that he is worthy of it.

Then, a series of resounding metallic blows were heard as Asha continued to repel the attacks, slowly retreating back. Suddenly, even greater confidence awoke in him, and he went from defense to offensive. With fury, he let out a furious shout, and began to swing his sword harder and sharper. Once he succeeded so much that he knocked the sword out of his opponent's hands and, without hesitation, struck several blows on his body: on the chest and on the stomach. He already knew that he would not see blood - it was not a person. Narrow furrows, from which a bright yellow light oozed, the same as the one in the monster's eyes, appeared at the sites of the blows instead of wounds. And almost immediately disappeared.

But the Indian did not retreat and struck harder and harder, inflicting wounds that no longer healed so quickly. Now, in blind anger, he controlled himself even less than when numbness and terror controlled him, and yet it saved his life, prolonging it for at least a few minutes, in which he was going to have time to prove that

honor had not left him, that he was capable and would fight for his life and would not bow his head to the enemy.

Yellow flashes flickered every second. Each of them was peculiar - sometimes long and narrow, sometimes almost round, when Asha made a lunge forward, piercing the enemy. But he himself felt as if he was not killing his opponent, but only accumulating strength before the main blow. And indeed, after a few seconds, his gaze flashed in a special way and he, shifting the power of his entire body into one blow, made a decisive swing of his sword and cut the monster in half. At the same moment, a dense golden cloud shot up from the two halves of the body into the air, which at first shrank a little, and then, as if exploding, flew in all directions.

Asha felt a chill wash over him. Mixed with terror, it climbed into his heart, expelling all confidence, draining him of strength, and cutting off his breath. He coughed, causing the dust to get down his throat, and he tasted it, swallowed it along with the air. The taste was simply unbearable, and Asha, choking, coughed even harder. He dropped his sword and heard a few more pops: other monsters appeared out of thin air right in front of him, different from humans, but completely dehumanized.

"People... They were all people," was the last thing that flashed through Asha's mind before what began to happen next. A simple thought that had been obvious before, but now appeared before him in some new light. He thought for a moment. Just for a moment, but this enlightenment gave him a lot more understanding than the last few hours. Something turned people into these monsters. The same thing that moved the sun; the same thing that gave birth to the pillar of light that fell from heaven. All this is part of something whole, a single one. And it tries to become even bigger, absorbing everything in this world - people, stones. Anything. Turning into something not just unified, but, rather, the only one in the whole world. But if there is nothing else besides one thing, then it is not the world at all. This is emptiness. Perfect harmony, devoid of chaos, the source of which can be anything. But in the first place is the person himself - the source of changes and transformations with his sometimes indomitable nature, a storm of feelings and emotions, a chaotic swarm of a wide variety of thoughts.

Asha plunged into this emptiness. Still trying to shake off the nauseating taste in his mouth, he saw the figures continue to appear in the air. But they became more and more shapeless, unreal, as if they were not there, and they were just random mirages drawn by Asha's frightened imagination.

Light breezes swept over his face, the vain swing of his swords, which now looked like white ghostly streaks that cut through the air and left misty trails in it. Walls, columns, and even sunlight were

melting. The last thing that came out of reality was the furious roar of one of the monsters, which, trying to strike at the Indian, only cut through the dusty air. After that, everything plunged into absolute silence, diluted with calm. But Asha did not feel peace. On the contrary, he felt that he was in a place even more horrible than the one from which he had just disappeared. There, however, life continued to flow according to some laws that were clear to him. The opponents and he are in a fight for life, which could be death if the fight was lost. Death was frightening, but it was understandable. Asha could get used to the idea of her. Human life eternally passes at the very edge of the abyss, striving every second to fall into it and break off.

But this place was much worse. To his horror, Asha realized that there could be something worse than death, even if it happened under such unusual circumstances. A place in which there is nothing. Even his blade was still there somewhere. And he himself was here. In a place where there is no darkness, no light, no evil, no good, nothing. There is only what he brought with him - the fear of the unknown. This was his sentence. And Asha did not even know: would he escape from here? Will he be able to escape? And how did he get here in the first place? Maybe it's all his fault? Fear is devastating. You lose everything old that kept you in life, and you don't find anything new to replace it and you remain somewhere in between, without any movement, in a world that doesn't live and doesn't change. The whole world is one empty moment, spread over hundreds of days. Thousand. Millions. Stretched out forever.

And a person always rejoices in everything that saves him from emptiness, bringing at least something to it that gives hope for change. Asha, who, although he did not see himself and was not completely sure that he felt, was somehow convinced that he was now on his knees, as if begging for something.

And someone, as if heeding his pleas, whispered to him that he should stretch out his hand forward. And the whole body will follow the hand. And the soul. But only if he believes in it and does everything himself. After all, there is nothing to hold on to in the void. Only for himself. By starting from your own, however small, confidence, you can achieve something that can help grow this confidence, making it much stronger.

And he felt his hand clutching something like a torch. He did not see the fire, but he felt it. I didn't see it because it was a completely unusual fire. An ordinary one only disperses darkness, and the flame of this torch disperses the emptiness. And even though like an ordinary fire it can turn darkness into just semi-darkness, this invisible torch did not turn the void into the world that Asha was familiar with, but only added something to it that could catch the eye.

Now the Indian stood firmly on his feet and felt more confident than a minute ago. He lowered his eyes and was finally able to see himself - he had regained his body. Maybe he didn't lose it, but he couldn't say for sure - he didn't see it and practically didn't feel it. And if he did, it was as if out of habit, knowing that he and his body were inseparable things. But emptiness lived according to other, its own laws, which cannot be realized in a minute. This is why so much uncertainty was born in him.

But now the gift that had come out of nowhere gave Asha the opportunity to tear herself away from it all. And he even got an answer to one of his questions: yes, he can escape from the void. Or rather, he already could. After all, the world, no matter how strange it is, with millions of stars flashing around Asha, is already far from emptiness. The silvery light cut through the darkness that enveloped everything around. Darkness and light appeared - the basis of everything, two principles that, being hostile and allious, give birth to everything.

But the stars burned not only above Asha's head, as he was used to seeing it in the sky. The stars burned beneath him, for there was no earth beneath his feet. The celestial sphere completely enveloped him and surrounded him on all sides with a pleasant brilliance.

Asha felt a growing confidence and continued to move the torch from side to side, trying to leave as little void as possible by filling it with whatever he wanted. It was as if he was painting his own world on a huge canvas. But he did not know what his drawing would turn out to be, as if he were drawing blindly. But he tried to understand and bend these changes to his will. He tried to trace the horizon line, and after his hand, instead of a black canvas with stars, a blue stripe appeared, from which lightening spots ran upwards. He raised his hand a little higher and imagined clouds covering almost the entire sky. And after his thoughts, clouds began to appear in the sky, the color of which smoothly changed from blue to dazzling white. And somewhere above, right above him, there was room for the sun. He threw up his hand as if to command the sun to break through the veil of clouds. But apart from a dim flash, nothing happened. The clouds lit up a little stronger, but the sun did not break through them. Asha tried again, but this time nothing happened at all. Maybe he wanted too much? He decided to stop and immediately felt something pulling him upward at the same time as his thought of stopping. And he felt himself getting a little closer to the sun, as if as a reward for his decision. That is, having found the strength to give up something, he got what he wanted. But his rise was short, and Asha felt himself being pulled down. Slowly but inexorably. He was amazed at how contrasting the world surrounded him now - darkness and light, ups and downs. But all this is an echo of the real, real world, the one from

which he escaped or was helped to escape. Now he realized that his journey through the void was not a punishment or a sentence at all, but rather a salvation. And when he realized this, he felt his body rushing upwards again. And he felt the warmth of the sun more strongly. And then there was another fall. Small realizations pulled him up, and inaction pulled him down. Asha realized that he needed to constantly strive forward, at least mentally, trying to understand everything around him, in order to move forward for real. Or rather, upwards, to the sun, whose light was here, like the fire of a wonderful torch expelling emptiness.

Asha did not stop and, without ceasing to think, tried to create further. Although he felt that he was standing firmly on his feet, he still wanted to see and feel the ground beneath him, on which he was accustomed to walk. But, as with the sun, he did not succeed. However, it was not that nothing was happening: the clouds circling above his head were thickening, turning into something solid, resembling the earth's firmament with every second. The earth is above him, not under his feet. The whole world is the opposite: the sky is below, the earth is above. Or maybe everything is right, and he himself breaks all the rules? And he himself is upside down?

But the changes did not end there. The stars in the sky, which seemed to be firmly fixed for centuries, suddenly fled from their places. At first, all in one direction, then in groups in different directions. And then each star carved its own path. And after a few seconds, they ceased to be stars at all, but began to resemble dust, a thick swarm of grains of sand that rose up and almost touched Asha's feet, slowly moving down towards this dust.

That yellow light had caught up with him even here! But Asha did not feel as defenseless as he did in the face of a crowd of monsters that appeared out of thin air. Afraid to mistakenly turn this dust into something even more terrible, he still took a risk and waved the torch once more. He put so much inner strength and hope into this swing that it seemed to melt into thin air. But Asha managed to do what he wanted. The ground above him was covered with water, which instantly rushed down, more like rain. He didn't know it would be water, but he could see that it was just touching the yellow clouds below and dispersing them. Absorbs, destroys, pushes down. And they were unable to do anything against this element.

The water was pleasant, thanks to it, Asha finally got rid of the unpleasant taste in his mouth. The pleasure that ran through his body along with the coolness of the rain - it was like nothing else - he closed his eyes. Although Asha did not like rain, it was the most pleasant for him now. And maybe from that moment on, he will even love it.

When he opened his eyes, the young man saw that he was in the dining room, and it looked exactly the same as it was when he left it. And there are two or three dozen monsters around. Asha felt as if he was falling down again under their gaze. Thinking back to his miraculous vision, he remembered - although it had been a second ago, he remembered everything as events of many years ago - that the water had destroyed the clouds of yellow dust. He had no doubt that the light oozing from the monsters' eyes and wounds and the dust were the same thing. And his gaze accidentally fell on one of the walls, into which a sink with water poured into it was cut. His thoughts were intertwined into a single chain that helped him climb out of the abyss. And he felt the familiar feeling of rising upwards, although he was still standing firmly on the stone floor.

Asha grabbed the sword from the floor and without a moment's hesitation rushed to the water. When he reached it, he dipped his sword into the water and, without any hesitation, swung his sword, turning sharply. His confidence was so strong that he didn't even look where he was shooting. And his faith did not fail him - with the very first blow he cut the chest of one of the attackers. But when he fell to the floor from a strong blow, he did not come to life and did not turn into anything - he simply melted, although not in an instant. Sparking small sparks, his body tried to fight, but the water confidently drove every grain of sand in him away, causing it to inexplicably disappear.

Feeling the excitement of the first success, Asha plunged his sword into the water once more, and rushed at the monsters himself. As he ran, he dodged the first blow and immediately struck his own at the monster behind the first attacker. And then another one in the back of the first. Every time the same thing happened - they died. In the heat of battle, he didn't have time to think about whether this could even be called death.

A sharp dash forward and a blow to the chest of one of the nearest opponents. The charge was so strong that the blade burst from the other side of the monster, pushing him back a few steps to where another one stood. Having lost control, the first knocked the second to the floor. Asha rushed towards him, making a high jump to avoid being kicked in the legs, and plunged his sword into him, taking advantage of the moment's confusion. And so it went on second after second - a jump or a squat, a blow and another monster left the world for which Asha fought.

But each time, the death of the monster lasted longer: the water almost disappeared from the sword. And then the moment came when Asha was left alone with the last monster. He was a little taller than the young man, but he ignored it and plunged his sword into him as well. The monster roared, which meant that it was in some sort of pain, but it didn't collapse immediately. He grabbed the blade

and pulled Asha to him, staring at it. He, not frightened, looking as if through his enemy, pulled the handle up, cutting the monster, and then kicked it off the edge. Falling, the monster repeated the fate of the others.

But the silence that Asha was waiting for hung no longer than half a minute, after which the pops were heard in the air again and new monsters began to appear one after another. Only now there were not two dozen, but several hundred of them.

Inflamed by the recently ended battle, but still not losing his mind, Asha realized that he could not cope with this small army. And again he turned to his memories. What happened the last time he was powerless? Something took him into the void and showed him the path that gave him salvation. What if it happens again? But then he was afraid that the story with the sun could repeat itself - what he wanted would not happen. So he needs to...

Asha blindly rushed at the monsters. But before he had reached five steps, he felt that reality had faded again, and he had returned to the world that had already saved him. What is this? Deceit? Did he get here by deception? Or is it a reward? After all, his risk was absolutely real! Somehow, Asha was once again stepping over the abyss dotted with countless stars. Then he closed his eyes, took a deep breath and imagined the courtyard in front of the soldiers' canteen, through which he had recently passed. He opened his eyes and stepped back on solid ground, but this time outside the walls of his prison. And I saw how all around me were filled with those lifeless yellow eyes. But no matter how close he got to them, no one rushed at him. No one saw him, as if his thoughts were hidden under something through which these glances do not pass. He was invisible and inaudible to the monsters.

All these successes brought his confidence closer to a dangerous limit. Asha stopped near one of the monsters, examining it carefully. A thick-looking body, hidden under ragged soldiers' clothes, a long halberd grasped by two hands. Asha examined his palms, clawed fingers with ash-gray skin that vaguely resembled a human's. The monster was a head taller than the Indian. Asha paid most attention to his eyes. Now they did not seem to him as lifeless and the same as before. They retained their yellow color, but Asha saw something in them that made them different from those his memory had captured. It was not a tinge of sanity, and the same unrelenting cruelty still burned in them. But still, something was completely different.

Asha himself found only one explanation for this - fear. But how can these creatures experience it? It was a crazy explanation, and the Indian did not like it, but when it happened to be in his head, it instantly took root there. And after a few seconds, he found confirmation of it: as he walked past the rows of monsters, he noticed

that even though they were standing straight, their eyes were watching him. They watch with fear, which does not allow them to take even a step and rush at him. As if they saw him as some kind of force that could easily cope with them all.

Asha was also struck by the fact that they were watching him only with their eyes. They do not eavesdrop on his thoughts. It was impossible to verify, but he was unreasonably sure of it. It turned out that their entire essence was captive to some unknown force that protected Asha. Or which he himself was, as it seemed to him. In the monsters, the remnants of human essence could be seen, namely in the expression of the eyes. But was it only fear in them? Maybe this is hope? Hope for ... salvation?

Asha realized that these lifeless bodies were still somehow connected to their souls, but they felt lost, discarded, and unwanted. And now they are looking at him, begging for help.

He understood that he simply had no right to leave here - he had managed to find an extraordinary path between living people and these creatures, and he definitely had to use it! And what if Ajit was among them? Or did his fate somehow depend on whether Asha would follow this path? Maybe he can help his friend too?

And suddenly he realized something else - what was really in front of him. Limitless possibilities and knowledge, which itself poured into him in the form of accidental, but always correct guesses. But he was an ordinary person, and he felt dizzy. To get such a thing in a matter of seconds is beyond human capabilities. And yet he still wanted these abilities, longed to walk at least a few steps along this path. Stronger and stronger every second.

And almost immediately, his wish came true, but it turned into something unimaginable for an ordinary person. Asha felt that he was leaving his own body. He leaves without regret, because he knows that it is not forever. As he ceased to feel connected to his flesh, he felt something else, some kind of connection to all the monsters that stood in the courtyard. Only communication - he did not see or hear them. It was as if he had become the air they would breathe if they were human. Clean, not poisoned by yellow dust. And not just air, it was all they needed: salvation, reassurance. A confidence that permeated him. Asha was like a drop flowing down a groove: until recently he had been filled only with timid hope and intense fear, mixed with incomprehension, which were on one side of this groove, and now he was imbued with almost absolute certainty, felt a connection with some kind of knowledge that gave it. And he no longer doubted that for some reason he had a strange power.

And this power was more and more revealed to him - now he could already see. But not the way an ordinary person sees. He looked from all points at the same time, but not from the side, but as

if from the inside. Asha saw his own body, his face, on which a surprised expression froze. On top of this body lay a strange white haze, which clung quite tightly to it. It seemed to be woven from some weightless threads, thin like a spider's web, each of which, wrapping around him, stretched to the side, touching these monstrous creatures. Some threads ran away somewhere far away and got lost there. And Asha, being out of the body, slides over them. And at the same time, she feels each one at the same time. This incredible tangle is his new body. But he suddenly felt a longing for the old. He knew that he could not feel the feeling of touch. Ordinary touch. He will never grasp the hilt of a sword. Although, on the other hand, why does he need ordinary human weapons if he has such opportunities in front of him? But once back in his body, Asha could combine all of this. As soon as he thought this, he instantly, sliding along the threads, came back together and found himself in his body.

Looking at the world again with his own eyes, he began to swallow air sharply and greedily. It seemed that he had forgotten everything that had just happened to him. But when he was sure that he could taste the air again, he closed his eyes and saw almost the same picture as outside his body. Then, without hesitation, he gathered all his strength together and exhaled sharply, seeing how the threads around him shook and how strange drops scattered over them, each of which, touching the monster, made it disappear. Asha opened his eyes and saw that there was no one around him. He closed his eyes, but this time he saw nothing. Just darkness and shapeless red spots, the only reason for which was the midday sun breaking through the eyelids. But in his memory there were those light flashes, after which the monsters turned into golden dust, soared upwards and immediately melted into thin air.

So he freed these creatures from suffering? Killed the monsters, but gave peace to the souls of the people they once were?

And is he a man himself? After all, an ordinary person cannot do what he has managed to do now. But he felt, breathed, saw, and heard just like the rest of the people. Where was this difference? Or was he not there at all, and he only felt the world through someone else for a few moments? Or rather, through something else?

There was only one way to find out everything - to check. Will he be able to repeat all this again? But—this conclusion frightened Asha a little—he had to find at least one of these creatures to do so, because there was no one around him right now. He even wanted to call one of them, but he could not make up his mind.

Under the scorching sun, thinking, Asha wandered further, away from this place, past the barracks. Not really choosing the road, he passed through a small palm grove, beautifully framed by bushes with long narrow leaves. Then he found himself in front of a small

fountain, which seemed to be hidden in this shallow but rather dense island of greenery. Asha approached him, scooped up the water with both hands and drank it greedily. It was cold and therefore especially pleasant. After that, he filled his palms with water several more times and drank the water from them without residue.

Shaking the drops from his hands and casually wiping them on his clothes, he sat down on the edge of the fountain - it was made of stone, had a round shape, and in the center of it stood the figure of a young girl holding a jug on her shoulder, from which water flowed.

The stream oozed quite lazily, and therefore the surface of the water was quite smooth, and Asha could clearly see his reflection. His face betrayed terrible fatigue, his clothes were stained and torn, his hands were scarred. But he did not pay attention to the details, but tried to look deeper. See everything as a whole.

Reflection repeats reality. It does not replace, but repeats. And he saw his reflection trembling in those sparkling ripples on the surface of the water, ready to disappear from any accidental breeze, or from touching the water with his hand or throwing a stone at it, for example. And what if he himself is still alive only by a happy accident? And that very little is enough to cope with it? But what about his strange abilities? Will they help him? Then we need to find out if they really exist or is it all a vision, a mirage?

Asha got up and decided to move on. After walking a little more through the thickets, the young man found himself on a road paved with smooth elongated stones, sunk into the ground about knee-deep. As he walked on, he noticed that the road widened and descended lower, which made it seem that the walls were growing higher and higher from the ground. Along their upper borders stretched a strip, painted alternately scarlet and gray, and slightly protruding from the wall. After the turn, Asha saw that the road ended in a rather high arch, the top of which was painted in the same colors, and on the sides of it, supporting, there were two columns. The arch was closed with a gate made of metal pointed rods. But bowls were made in the walls: from some hung long, beautiful leaves of some plants, and in others grew flowers. After making sure that the gate was locked, Asha began to climb the ledges in the wall. Once at the top of the wall, he saw that behind the arch there was a small square, and immediately behind it stood a large building, long, partially hidden from view by a thicket of trees. Behind it rose a majestic rock that was much higher than the building itself.

Seeing this picture, Asha immediately felt that he was drawn there, that there was something hidden there that could give an answer to at least one of the thousands of questions.

He was about to dismount from the other side to step into the square and reach his goal, when suddenly he heard a familiar, but no

more pleasant sound behind him - the heavy footsteps of the same monster that attacked him and Ajit. Did it really decide to catch up with him? But why him? Is it...

The next accidental guess turned everything upside down in Asha's thoughts:

"Am I here alone?"

The only living person. No city dwellers, no Ajit, no princess. Only those ugly monsters with yellow eyes and one special one, the one that was approaching him around the corner.

Asha went down as quickly as possible and, crouching down and trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, looked through the leaves. The monster was on the other side of the gate, and the footsteps could be heard getting clearer and closer to him. This distracted Asha from his terrible thoughts for a while. He completely forgot about them, when the footsteps suddenly stopped - the animal stopped.

"What is he going to do?" thought the young man.

Suddenly, a terrible roar was heard, mixed with the crack and crash of breaking stone. Asha saw the bent metal gate fly forward about twenty paces along with stone shards and dust - with one powerful blow, the monster turned the arch, clearing the passage. When the dust cleared slightly, the footsteps were heard again: the monster passed by Asha and moved on. With a sinking heart, the Indian continued to watch.

Meanwhile, the beast reached the center of the square and... Disappeared! In surprise, Asha stopped breathing and even stepped back, as if expecting something terrible. But nothing happened, except that Asha bumped his back against the stone wall and shuddered, coming to his senses and inhaling sharply.

And suddenly a new idea came to him, after which he wanted to call himself a fool - what if you did the same thing with this beast as with a crowd of monsters near the dining room? And maybe then...

His head could not cope with the new flow of thoughts. He realized one thing: he had to run to the place where the monster had disappeared. He jumped up and ran as fast as he could. But he didn't even have time to make half the way when the monster appeared out of thin air almost in the same place with its back to Asha. He did not expect this so much that, trying to stop, he caught his foot on a stone and rolled down the road. Having rolled over several times and hit his head, Asha found himself lying on his stomach. He immediately looked at the beast, which turned and gave the Indian a look devoid of any interest. And then he just turned away and walked on.

Standing up and mechanically rubbing his bruised head and elbow, Asha was already thinking about what had happened. Where does the beast go if, even when he sees the young man, he does not

change his path? Now Asha was even more attracted to this building. And this monster was heading there, Asha had no doubt about that. So he got up from the rocks and slowly followed him in the distance.

Human footsteps were drowned out by the massive tread of the giant. Asha, following him, tried to imagine this picture from the outside, to feel again hundreds of ghostly threads, which, flying away from him, twisted around the monster, entangled him and freed the soul imprisoned in him. But he could not do it. All he achieved was that when he closed his eyes, he saw not blackness, but a faint white spot in front of him, exactly in the place where the beast was striding heavily, leaving huge footprints. Asha alternately closed and opened his eyes several times, but the picture did not become clearer.

But suddenly, once again opening his eyes, he found that there was no one in front of him. The monster has disappeared again! He closed his eyes, but to his surprise, he found that the white spot had not disappeared and continued to move. Without opening his eyes, Asha continued to move after him. He felt the walls grow on either side of him, a slight coolness wafting from them, the sun above his head disappeared, and now the ceiling hung over him. Gradually, he even began to see the outlines of the corridor he was walking through. Then he saw a ladder grow in front of him, a spot floating up it, and Asha followed in that direction as well. Then another long corridor, and then a lot of light. No walls, no white spots. He saw the same thing again as any person with his eyes closed. He opened them and saw that he found himself in a huge hall, on the walls of which there were large balconies in several tiers, and rivers of sunlight poured from the windows above, perfectly illuminating everything around. Looking around, Asha saw long shelves of books. They were everywhere: both downstairs and on the balconies.

Absolute silence reigned all around, broken only by the sounds of the slow steps of the Indian, which turned into a light echo and quickly drowned somewhere in countless corridors - along each wall there were several doors, leading, apparently, to balconies or somewhere else.

The Hall of Knowledge breathed calm and seemed detached from everything that was happening, completely untouched and eternal. Being in it, Asha seemed to touch something, hitherto unknown to him, but great and just as eternal.

Walking to the middle of the hall, he saw that a cloud was swirling in the distance, and through it he could see something like a large bowl.

"This is it!" thought Asha and rushed forward.

Not having reached about twenty paces, he stopped and examined what was in front of him. It was a bowl that stood on a

small elevation, to which several steps ascended. It was huge in size, clouds of golden dust poured out of it, like steam.

Taking a quick look at the bowl, Asha decided to approach it and look into it. What he saw at first did not surprise him at all - he saw his reflection, almost the same as in the fountain, but not fluctuating, but perfectly even. However, it was not water at all. Something very similar, reflecting a human face, but not water.

Asha was already beginning to be disappointed in the find, when suddenly he saw that his face was beginning to change. His black hair had turned gray and thinned much thinner, and his skin was dry and wrinkled, though his face did not look like the old man's face, it was still young. Her skin turned from flesh-colored to ashen, which almost began to merge with her hair.

Suddenly, an insane horror flashed in his own eyes, which immediately transmigrated into the owner of the reflection. And then the eyes closed and, opening again, lit up with bright yellow lights. Unable to face the horror any longer, Asha ran back, feeling fear take hold of him, and would have taken possession of it if it hadn't been for another accidental hunch: time after time, they continued to save him. He saw not himself, but a reflection. But if it's not water at all, then maybe it's not an ordinary reflection? Asha suddenly realized how he had already managed to encounter reflections more than once in the past few hours, and each spoke about something different. He remembered a bizarre vision in which there was a strange, upside-down world - maybe it was also just a reflection? Maybe everything around him is a distorted reflection of reality, which captivated everything around him. And he is there, in this bowl - is it not him at all, but what she wants to turn him into? But it seems that she has not yet succeeded: Asha felt that he still looked like an ordinary person. Moreover, he took what had happened as a kind of lesson: fear really lived in him and a stupid, and false, reflection pulled him out. He should not doubt anything and then he will be able to fix everything. And even if he sometimes lacks confidence, there must be at least a faint hope.

Instantly, instead of fear, confidence spread through his body, and he approached the cup again. Not knowing what he was supposed to do, he plunged his hand into what looked like water. At first, touching the surface of this peculiar mirror, he felt a chill. Plunging his hand further, Asha felt that the cold was getting really strong, but as soon as he imagined his target a little harder, it was as if he was retreating. Feeling the bottom of the thicket, Asha noticed that nothing had happened, except that any of his reflection had disappeared from the mirror at all.

Nothing happened to him, but he did not get any closer to his goal - the bowl continued to exude yellow dust and burn with cold.

Asha, a little disappointed, took out his hand, rubbed it with his free palm, trying to warm it up. After that, he looked back at the mirror. Nothing happened for a few seconds, and then he saw the reflection of the hall lose color and seem to age before his eyes - stones began to crumble from the walls, cracks ran along the ceiling.

Asha took a few steps back and stopped seeing what was happening in the reflection. But unexpectedly, what was happening in it began to slowly but surely creep into the real world, which was on the same side of the mirror with Asha. At first, the bowl, shining with novelty, turned into a gray, cracked block of stone, and then everything around began to become the same. Asha, who was standing very close, jumped back, afraid that the same fate awaited him. But suddenly everything stopped, froze in place. A small circle around the bowl and a part of the wall behind it remained absorbed.

A strange rustle was heard behind him. Asha, already accustomed to silence, turned around, but at first did not see anything, which only excited him more. Then he noticed that approximately in the center of the hall, a sand hill was growing directly from the stone floor. As it grew larger, it gradually began to resemble the outlines of a human figure: arms grew, a head appeared, although everything was somehow fuzzy, ready to crumble at any moment.

Asha, already accustomed to surprises and this kind of meetings, realized that this was another monster, whose plans hardly included anything more refined than murder. Meanwhile, the creature grew up and almost completely resembled a man, but only in body. His eyes betrayed a monster in him.

Again, Asha felt a strange desire. He couldn't see anything in the creature's eyes—he couldn't see them—but he felt a growing call inside him to repeat the liberation. But as soon as he thought about it, he cried out in insane pain that pierced his body like a sharp spear. Unusual pain, thousands of times stronger than usual, but not killing, but tortured. His hands trembled, his head began to spin, and his eyes rolled back. The pain in his temples pounded so hard that he almost went mad and fell to the floor, continuing to twitch from it like a man dying from a terrible wound.

The pain disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared. But Asha couldn't notice it right away: such pain couldn't be forgotten at once, it was as if he had gotten used to it. But it did not become more gentle from getting used to it. When it was all over, he found himself lying on his back with his arms outstretched and his head turned to the side. Trying to get up, Asha was even a little surprised that he did not feel anything at all unpleasant at the same time.

Another rustle, this time louder, immediately brought him back to the real world. He saw a strange creature moving towards him,

from which thin streams of dust emanated in all directions, drawing a bizarre figure in the air and flowing again into his body. Asha, who had not yet realized what had just happened to him, drew attention to a strange sensation. It seemed to him as if he was being flayed, but at the same time he did not feel any pain. He felt his growing defenselessness, although he still refused to believe in it. It seemed to him that before that he seemed to be under some kind of cover, and now he was disappearing.

Asha closed his eyes and saw just that, a thick network of thin threads sliding off him and stripping him of protection. The bowl absorbed this flow of threads. He tried to concentrate, imagined again how his consciousness was sliding along these threads. But this time everything went wrong. At first, he felt the familiar feeling that he was leaving his body, following this strange veil. But the feeling was also unfamiliar because he knew that if he left the body completely, he would never return to it. The cup will swallow him up. He immediately remembered his recent pain, and it seemed to him that he felt it again. But being less than half in his body, Asha did not feel it so acutely. Although this was not at all encouraging: it seemed to him that he was dying. He could take this new road, but whether it led to anything for which he could say goodbye to life, he did not know. And not only did he not know, but did not believe. In part, this disbelief was supported by fear. Ordinary human fear of death. And he pulled Asha back, as if saving.

Coming to his senses, the young man realized that it was not known whether his own fear had saved him from death or not - a monster was rushing at him, ready to tear Asha to shreds. But Asha would not dare to repeat his attempts: he remembered this taste of pain too much.

He found another sensation that did not please him at all. It was new, but terrible—a feeling of utter defenselessness. He felt lonely. It was strange, he had already guessed that he was the only living person in this place, but now this feeling had changed and became somehow especially depressing, hopeless.

The creature, which resembled one continuous whirlwind, suddenly crumbled in the air and formed a kind of whirling dome, cutting off any escape route for Ashe. The vortex that rotated this dome was accelerating more and more. Asha saw how books torn in the wind, fragments of wooden shelves and stones of the walls were drawn into it, merging into a single deadly stream.

The feeling of loneliness and loss pressed on Asha from the inside more and more. Where are his abilities, which have already saved his life more than once? Maybe they don't exist at all? A simple deception that lured him into a trap? Could it be that the cup did with one touch what hundreds of monsters could not? Asha prepared for

death. He did not know whether it would be fast or slow. And he didn't know if he would feel it at all.

The whirlwind was narrowing and ready to finish off the Indian at any moment. But suddenly something happened that was not part of the plans of both of them: the air turned black and sparkled, and then something broke the whirlwind, scattering millions of dust particles and debris apart.

Asha saw an unusually beautiful sight: he seemed to be inside a huge fire - the air was ablaze with orange spots, and dust particles were flying around, resembling ashes and sparks. But again he did not notice this, but thought about something else: what had saved him when there was no hope? Not him himself - that's for sure. He suddenly realized that this something that was helping him was following him from the dining room itself. Or maybe before, but he hadn't noticed it. He wanted to assume that this was one of the souls he had saved, but it was ridiculous: the unknown helper had appeared much earlier. And it was not Asha, but he who freed those monsters from their bodies disfigured by the bowl.

But why is he worthy of such help? And is it eternal? Or at the most necessary moment he will have nothing to count on?

All these considerations made Asha sick. Trying to distract himself, he looked around him. The hall has changed a lot. Boulders were scattered everywhere, many balconies had collapsed, and the walls were corroded by cracks. Then he noticed the specks of dust in the air, of which there were not many. Asha realized that they were the remnants of that monstrous whirlwind. And the whirlwind was born from that monster. And he...

Asha staggered on the spot. He remembered how the creature had grown right out of the stone floor, from a small handful of Sand. It was the same soldier who had turned into the same handful of Sand in front of his and Ajit's eyes. It turns out that he did not die, but in this strange way turned into one of these monsters. But now he was gone, as if Asha felt that these specks of dust in the air were no longer connected to each other.

A minute or two passed, and Asha noticed that the air around him had returned to its usual appearance, but the light no longer penetrated through the windows above. It was dark and creepy in the hall. Asha was again left alone with silence. He did not feel the presence of the mysterious savior. There were no monsters around. He was not interested in the cup, as if he had overcome contact with it as some inevitable test. Perhaps even too easily. He was left alone with his thoughts - they were the most important thing now. He felt that he simply needed to think about everything that had happened, to understand everything and understand the essence of these events. Asha found something special, some centuries-old wisdom. It

is very symbolic that he was in the rich library of the Sultan, a veritable storehouse of knowledge that he was allowed to touch. Perhaps that was what Ajit had not told him? And he was right, because it is impossible to convey it in words. You need to go through such an experience yourself.

Now Asha felt a special calm, as if the whole world froze and time stopped. Time to ask questions and get answers. The only one who was able to give them was his invisible helper. Who is he? Could it be Ajit? Asha dismissed the thought almost immediately: it would have required Ajit to be in two places at once. It was someone else. But how to see it? And why is it so carefully hidden? All of Asha's attempts to look around with her unusual vision ended in nothing. Although he no longer felt pain. What if the cup could help him? Now he is confident in his abilities. Why does it attract him so much? Asha turned around and walked over to the bowl again, this time just staring into it. This time, his reflection remained the same, nothing happened. Again, he ventured to reach out his hands to the surface of what filled the bowl. But this time he did not quickly immerse them, but slowly led them to the mirror surface. There was a look of certainty in his eyes, as if he had some kind of plan in mind. And the smooth surface gave way, pressing into the bowl, repeating the shape of his hands. Now it was not the contents of the cup that changed Ash, but he changed its contents. Leaving his mark on it, he expected to see its reflection. A reflection of his strange power, for it was the power that affected the chalice.

And the mirror answered him, almost immediately. He saw in it the vague outlines of the hall as something insignificant. I saw people filling the hall with knowledge. The story of this place seemed to pass in a second or two, and slowed down the moment Asha entered the hall. He had seen himself walking across the hall a few minutes ago. Then, instead of a monster and a whirlwind, he saw an almost ordinary person who was taking in some strange stream from the chalice, as if pushed by some force. The insignificant features of the hall faded even more, almost turning into emptiness - it seemed that the mirror somehow altered what it reflected. It highlights something more general, what is behind the visual image, revealing the very essence of things, which often turns out to be the opposite of what is seen or heard. But at the same time, such a reflection completes the phenomenon to a complete picture. Just as the surface of the sea hides a huge block of ice beneath it, showing only its top, so this bowl hid this addition of reality until Asha began to affect it.

And then the most interesting thing happened. It seems that this was the answer he had been looking for so long. The more the features of the hall itself faded, the more Asha noticed that everything around him had some kind of orange hue and seemed to

be waving, swirling like a morning mist. But this was only a faint, barely noticeable phenomenon, which was overshadowed by a stronger one that came immediately after the "whirlwind" - the whole reality turned into these clouds of trembling orange smoke, and among them a white spot clearly stood out, which quickly moved in the direction of Asha. The stain gradually acquired human features - arms, legs, head and some clothes were distinguishable. Now his mysterious friend seemed quite real to him, even though he saw him not with his own eyes, but as a vision given by the chalice. She seemed to absorb time, remembering reality in a special way.

Waiting for the moment when he approached the bowl again, Asha saw how the reflection repeated many times, *ad infinitum*, but was no longer able to show him anything new. Asha loosened his grip, realizing, however, that he had more questions than he had before the entire vision. He looked around. Night had already fallen. Time flowed in a special way in this palace. Unpredictable and uncontrollable. Or is someone managing all this?

He sat down on the steps and decided to think it over again.

Chapter 18. What did you call me?

Essen walked in front. He was somehow uncomfortable with this: in case of danger, he would not be lucky first. But pride would not let him go behind. The three of them will be able to defend themselves, at least try. For a while, as they walked in silence, Essen pondered. All feelings in him gradually gave way to anger again. Not one that would make him immediately rush at the Prince, accusing him of everything, but enough for the resentment to begin to grow. He involuntarily perceived the Prince as an enemy. But all this was overshadowed by the fact that this alliance was important now: being alone, Essen would have had a much less chance of survival. And there was something else that made him hesitate. After all, in spite of everything, the Prince was going to correct his mistake and for this he selflessly risked his life. He had already protected him and Farah from almost certain death more than once. Essen tried to cling to these thoughts as if they were salvation. He understood that in such a situation there was simply no time for personal enmity, even if justified.

They reached a small staircase leading down. Essen waved his hand and said:

"Let's come here!"

Farah and the Prince followed him in silence.

A minute later, as they walked down the next corridor, the Prince broke the silence.

"Essen, do you know why the Tower of Dawn is called that?"

"I know," he answered. The voice did not betray him, but a wave of dislike ran through his body when he heard the Prince. Suppressing this random outburst, Essen continued:

"This name was invented by our sultan. In general, it's simple: the Tower of Dawn is the tallest, and the sunrise from it is visible before the others. But, they say, Rifat was very happy when he came up with it. It used to be called the High Tower. After that, he moved the treasury there and forbade everyone to call the tower by its old name. He even threatened everyone with prison, but it did not come to that.

"How long will we have to wander here?" I can't see these walls anymore! Farah interjected.

"Oh, you will have to be patient, princess! It's a long way," Essen answered. "The palace is full of dangers that you both do not even know about.

-What do you mean? Farah and the Prince asked almost unanimously.

"Do you seriously think that you can just walk up to the Tower of Dawn and get into the treasury?" Essen asked with a challenge in his voice.

The Prince and Farah stared at him blankly, waiting for details. Essen hesitated.

"The fact is that Azad is equipped with a special security system that can deter or even stop the enemy. And when it all started, I put it into action. One wrong step, and you will find yourself, for example, locked up. Without the ability to get out, the door will simply slam shut and that's it. I must not tell this to strangers, and especially not to you. But, apparently, you will have to. And without me, you won't be able to take two steps soon! Essen began his story, looking smugly at the Prince and Farah.

Azad's palace was truly one great treasure trove. And the security system was a great addition. And all this gift was inherited from his father, Rifat himself was not capable of such a scope of thought and miracles.

"Stick to me and listen to what I say. It's a miracle that you didn't fall into any trap! Perhaps there was too much destruction in the part of the palace where you were. I'll help you overcome the traps, but don't expect me to reveal all the secrets to you," Essen continued. - All traps can be disabled or bypassed. Sometimes we'll have to be separated: I'm not going to show you how to turn them off. You will wait for me in the right place and try not to attract monsters.

After listening to Essen, the Prince nodded. Now, in his opinion, the alliance was mutual. Now Essen is as useful to them as they are to him.

They moved on. Essen walked beside them, but he was tense, grumpy, and fell silent at the first opportunity, which sometimes made it seem that he was not there at all, as if he were some kind of ghost and not a person. But he was true to his word and led them. He had said in time that one had to cling to this or that wall so as not to fall into a pit with spears; to go around the stone that shot a poisonous arrow or closed the doors behind and in front of them. Farah and the Prince walked in silence, hardly speaking. Essen's mood did not inspire them much to talk, at least not in his presence.

From time to time they came across small closed doors, from which there was a whiff of dampness. The prince had heard legends that the palace of Azad was erected on the ruins of another, more ancient one. And perhaps behind these doors lay secret passages that ran through these ruins. But Essen will definitely not tell you anything if you ask him. He only led them, sometimes leaving and catching up with them again.

The security system was designed to withstand the attack of an ordinary enemy and could not fully withstand the power of the Sands.

Some mechanisms did not work, the doors jammed, and the path was blocked by huge fragments of the palace walls. Sometimes the way forward was only possible thanks to Farah. More than once, she crawled into narrow crevices to open the door on the other side or pull the lever from the bars that guarded the next line. At such moments, especially when Essen was not around, Farah smiled mischievously, showing the Prince her independence and his helplessness. She tried to prove to him that not everything could be solved by brute force.

"Are you sure I'm not slowing you down?" She once asked sarcastically.

The prince took a deep breath and answered:

"Well, all right, all right!" Just don't repeat it every time, please. Otherwise, what if I don't want to look for you again, running around for hours if something happens?

His words were just a joke in response. Although he was really sure that Farah needed his help. She needs someone to protect her.

Sometimes Essen was gone for a long time (there must have been something wrong with the next mechanism, but he would never ask for help from the Prince or Farah). This gave the Prince and Farah the opportunity and time to talk.

At one of these moments, the Prince stood with his back against the wall, and turned the book in his hands. Trying to distract Farah, who was eating away with impatience, he asked:

"What do you think can be in her?"

He himself tried to cling to this book, as if it were some kind of key.

"I don't know, but it can be very important for the vizier, because he wouldn't carry it with you just like that!" I've known him for a long time and I've never seen this thing before. But it seems to me that he has not parted with her for a long time," Farah replied. "What if he discovers that it's missing?"

"I don't think the vizier knows where she is. But I feel that he will still not leave us alone. Now there is a short break, a lull. I'm sure Amar has something else in store!

The prince voiced aloud not only his fears, but also the most important fears of Farah and Essen. Named so clearly, without embellishment, they were depressing.

Meanwhile the Prince continued:

- I think these recordings are somehow related to Peski. Just like this dagger. It feels like he wants to put everything together for some purpose.

Farah said nothing. She agreed, but the Prince could see that such talk weighed on her. Now, in the moments of silence, she did not want to think about the vizier, about the Sands, and about all this

nightmare. The prince understood this and either kept silent or looked for some other topic. He suddenly wanted to get to know Farah better, because he spent most of his time alone with her. The prince even liked that she did not lose her mood and did not lose heart. Gradually, they learned to overcome some obstacles even without Essen's help. Together. And strength was also useful at times: the Prince could climb where Farah herself would not have climbed. Once at the top, he stretched out his hand to her and lifted her up. He remembered well that she had warm hands, it was pleasant in its own way. Sometimes Farah hesitated, feigning anger on her face, but she had to accept the Prince's help. In fact, she was glad that the Prince did not abandon her and helped her again and again. And she knew that he would be able to protect her from an enemy that was beyond her strength. These moments were enough for the Prince to get a good look at Farah's face. Now it seemed to him familiar for a long time, to the smallest detail. And I also remember her timid, sparkling look. And a thin but long strand of black hair lying on her face and slightly covering one eye. It was as if Farah's last little secret was hiding underneath.

They talked about almost everything. Conversations were short and long - it all depended on how long Essen was away. They asked each other about their childhood, about their native places. The prince learned from Farah that her father had never supported his two brothers and had stayed away from war. Sometimes he studied the Sands, but did not let Faro know about it. He never, according to her, intended to use them as a weapon. He sought wisdom in them, tried to know the world more deeply. And at the same time, he was deeply religious. Farah, despite being a princess, was trained as a child in the use of weapons, archery and even horseback riding - sometimes even against the will of her father. Listening to Farah, the Prince gradually realized that in ordinary life their paths would hardly ever cross, although their fates were somewhat similar. Now, by the will of these destinies, they are going the same way. However, it was difficult for them to talk about ordinary topics, because there was nothing ordinary around. Therefore, conversations about the past were much more pleasant. Although, perhaps, any conversation was more pleasant than silence. And sometimes it happened that the Prince and Farah parted for a short time - so cunning and intricate was the security system. And then both tried to get to the place of the next meeting as soon as possible.

"At some point, I realized that I could not trust him," the Prince said of the vizier. "He will stop at nothing to get his hands on this dagger. And I guess I'll give him what he wants. I'll plunge the dagger right into his black heart!"

"Is revenge important to you?" Farah answered. "Do you think you'll atone for your guilt in this way?" Do you think this is the most important thing?

These words made the Prince think. Gradually, changes took place in it. Everything changed its meaning. Now he was more and more willing to risk himself to protect Farah. He was slow to realize his mistakes. He even wanted to find some words of justification before her and before Essen.

The route they took was hardly the shortest. But Essen knew his business and led them along the most remote and desolate paths, although they often had to go very slowly. Unlike the Prince, he was not ready to face the next monster and therefore sought safety.

Here, in the endless corridors and dungeons, the sense of time was lost. It was difficult to answer whether an hour had passed or the whole night. The prince tried not to think about it. His thoughts were more occupied with Farah walking beside him. He was surprised to note to himself that she had shown herself to be a faithful companion. She did not attempt the dagger, she always came to the rescue and gladly kept up the conversation. Their union, although forced, resembled friendship. And circumstances united them more and more.

Sometimes Essen returned unexpectedly from a completely different direction, and the three of them walked again. One day, unable to stand the silence, the Prince suddenly spoke:

"He forced me to open the Hourglass.

-Forced? How is that? Essen asked snidely.

"When we brought the gifts to the Sultan in the main hall, the vizier suddenly came out to us and said that the greatest treasures were there. The Sultan immediately jumped up from his seat and ran towards them. My father also turned curiously. The vizier explained that these treasures could be obtained with the help of a dagger. I don't know exactly what pushed me, but I did it almost without hesitation. His words were so convincing," the Prince said.

"But didn't you resist it?" And I didn't think what it would lead to? Essen continued to ask.

"Most likely, I didn't think about anything. I was thinking about some kind of honor... Nonsense. I was a complete fool, and Amar took advantage of it," the Prince replied guiltily.

Such honesty softened Essen. And he received answers to his questions at the very time when he needed them. Perhaps he is not trying in vain now for their sake.

Soon they descended a small staircase, and came to a round carved arch, behind which stretched a short and narrow corridor, and beyond it was an exit. Square columns with relief drawings were often planted along the walls, sometimes with windows between

them. A fresh breeze blew through them, carrying away the nasty stale air. Light began to break through from everywhere, which meant that morning had already come.

"After the attack on Kashi, we walked through the desert for a long time. A sandstorm was beginning. I remember how the vizier strangely clutched the staff in his hands and whispered something! As soon as the Prince remembered and told the story, he realized that the storm was not the wrath of nature. This is the work of this vile old man!

"Do you think he did it?" Essen asked.

"Well, yes, who else?" That explains it all! He wanted to get the dagger and release the Sands even earlier. But after a while, the storm subsided and nothing bad happened. As if something had prevented him!

At this time, Farah walked silently beside her, with a thoughtful look, at first glance, not expressing any interest in what was happening. But this is only at first glance. Farah thought about the same incident, but she remembered the situation from her side. She did not see the vizier, she only remembered how a whirlwind swept in, bringing her out of her semi-oblivion. Sand climbed anywhere - in the eyes, in the throat. Everything inside Farah was so opposed to this that she wanted to stop what was happening. She didn't remember how she managed to free one hand from the rubbing ropes. And only now did she remember how she had thrown off some kind of cloak that protected her from the storm, and tried to get up. She succeeded, but she felt that the vortex was pressing on her from all sides so hard that it was about to kill her. Then she did not act on her own, but as if on someone's instructions. But she did not remember any compulsion, everything came from herself. She closed her eyes and held out her free hand. As her eyelids closed, she felt the storm subside. But with it, she herself lost her strength. My legs were filled with heaviness, my head began to hurt. And she falls on the hot sand, no longer seeing anything. Then there was a burning sensation on his cheek, someone's screams. All these memories, half of which were completely new to her, just acquired, flashed in her mind. And before she had time to recover from one flash, another followed. Farah's face was still calm and thoughtful, she was able to control herself, but a volcano of memories boiled inside her.

"It was I who prevented him!" Farah said suddenly.

-You will?! But how? The Prince asked in surprise.

"It's hard for me to explain. I wanted the storm to stop, and so it did. I don't remember well. Some fragments flash through my head, but I only remember how I got up and went to meet the wind. And then she fell to the ground, forgetting about everything," the girl answered, still trying to put the picture together. Now she felt about

the same as the Prince when he tried to assemble his sleep from incoherent stains.

At last they left the palace and found themselves in a beautiful place. To those who were in it, it might seem that nothing bad was happening – it was so good and beautiful there.

It was a small garden with a lattice roof entwined with plants hanging from the edges. Palm trees grew everywhere. The dew glittered on the grass, and when the rays of the rising sun fell on it, it sparkled with a million small lights, bright and dazzling, but still incredibly beautiful. As the Prince, Essen, and Farah walked in silence, the whisper of leaves enveloped them on all sides. Nature was moving away from the night's sleep, reviving. In the midst of all these faint sounds, it seemed that the trees were really talking to each other, to the little blades of grass and to the red sun in the east.

The silence did not last long. The Prince and Essen were too surprised.

"Are you sure of that?" And why didn't it happen anymore? The Prince asked.

"I'm not sure of anything. And I don't want to think about it, I feel uncomfortable with these memories," Farah replied upset and with some resentment in her voice.

"But..." the Prince did not calm down.

"Don't touch her, she said it hurts her to even think about it," Essen cut the Prince off sharply.

"I want to help us all!" The Prince said, feeling at the same time that he was making a mistake. Until recently, he regretted what he had done after every sad look of Farah, and now he was pushing her to suffer again. But he realized this later than he said the last sentence.

"You've already helped us all!" Thank you! Essen was excited. "At least she was able to resist it, and you yourself succumbed to this old man!" And now you're saying something else!

"Until you showed up, everything was much better!" The Prince threw back. "We would have found our way without you!"

"Stop it, you! Farah intervened in the quarrel. "If we quarrel now, it will get even worse. As long as we are together, we have at least some chances!"

When Farah said "together," of course, she meant not only being close to each other, but also being connected in actions and thoughts.

Continuing along the palace wall, they passed a small artificial pond filled with water about knee-deep. Its edges were made in the form of steps, and large, almost round leaves floated on the surface of the water, and here and there you could see half-open white lilies. The breeze stirred the water, making it ripple lightly, causing it to sparkle joyfully in the light of dawn, shimmering in all kinds of colors,

like a rainbow, as if rejoicing in a new day. People with all their problems and quarrels seemed superfluous in this serene and at the same time full of mysterious life.

"Am I telling a lie?" Essen switched to Farah.

"Anger is our enemy!" And the Sands are gnawing this feeling in you, and you yourself are succumbing to them more and more! Farah replied even more sharply. "And you too!" She said, turning to the Prince.

Hearing these words, Essen and the Prince fell silent.

The exit from the garden was furnished on both sides with low marble rotundas with green domes. They were decorated with long spires on top, and under them, in the center, there were small fountains with murmuring water.

The steps, which began right there, at the exit, led down, turning sharply in one place, and led to a wide road that ran along the top of the wall, majestically rising above the ground. On the sides of it grew groves of trees, and a little further I could see a beautiful park with many alleys and the same turrets.

In some places, the wall was not solid, but resembled a bridge - other roads passed under it, leading to different parts of the palace. If it were not for this nightmare, the Prince would have had time not only to visit the Sultan's menagerie, but also to relax in the bathhouse - the Sultan was really rich and loved luxury. Baths in the desert, where every drop is worth its weight in gold, is truly something special. He would be able to take a look at the collection of weapons. They say that Rustam's own sword was kept there! It is unimaginable how many treasures and wonders Azad keeps! And all this is now gone.

Sinking into silence again, the three of them walked on. The road led them straight to their cherished goal - the Tower of Dawn grew in front of them, striking with its height and grace. Several other towers adjoined it, as if propping it up.

When they were about halfway there, Essen muttered:

"Here it is, the Tower of Dawn.

He knew that it was clear without his words, otherwise why would they go there? But the silence in the air seemed so ominous to him that he decided to break it himself.

But after another second, the silence was really broken, and not in the best way for them:

"You are fools to resist the power of the Sands!"

In front of them, at a great distance, stood the vizier. Each of the three felt an inner disgust for him. Even Farah, who was not angry, felt a wild hatred for Amar for a moment.

The latter, as if nothing had happened, stood in place, as if grinning. The prince noticed how strong the old man's voice sounded.

It was the voice of a burly middle-aged man. But it belonged to this unsightly-looking old man. The Prince had no doubts - the Sands gave him strength. And really, what can an old, sick person want? The strength that he possessed in his youth.

Meanwhile, the vizier went to them. Behind him, his servants appeared in the air one after another, vile sand creatures. Several rows of bright yellow eyes were clearly visible, the rest merged into a single gray-yellow spot, which menacingly froze in absolute silence.

"You won't frighten us with these creatures!" The Prince shouted.

Amar didn't answer, just smiled vaguely. But his smile never bode well.

"They're just pathetic toys compared to the real power of the Sands!" Amar finally answered. "It's hard to imagine anything more powerful!"

"And terrible!" Farah shouted with pain in her voice.

"The sands are terrible only for those who do not understand them, who see evil in them. Sands were born long before people. They have been accumulating wisdom and strength for thousands of years. But the pathetic humans could not fully comprehend them, encasing all the power inside the Hourglass! Now they are free and everything is going as it should go! The vizier began to tell.

- No, everything is going the way *you* want! You betrayed my father and me, you betrayed everyone! - Farah threw back tears and anger with difficulty.

"Shut up, girl!" The vizier hissed in disgust. "When you're alone, you'll give up sooner or later!" Your strength is not enough!

"Why will I be alone?" The princess asked in fright. She felt uncomfortable at these words. What is the vizier up to? Why is he so sure?

"Your companions are alive by a great accident. In a world ruled by the Sands, happy accidents are not repeated. As for you, my young friend, your time is running out. You opened the Hourglass and incurred the wrath of the ancient guardian of time. Soon he will come for you and you will go to the world of death! Amar said. In his voice, you could feel how incredibly pleased he was with what was happening and how confident he was.

"Sands are ancient magic," he continued, "they surround us from birth, giving us wisdom. If there were no Peski, there would be no people. Or only pitiful creatures like them, incapable of thinking. Sands build our minds. And they control time! And not like this dagger," the vizier's eyes flashed slightly, "but infinitely, so that people could not even dream of it!

Farah, Essen, and the Prince listened attentively, but each was on his guard—anything could be expected at any second.

The crowd of monsters behind Amar did not move, but it seemed that at the first wave of their hand they would rush towards the people and tear them apart.

"Look at this sun. You are used to the fact that day after day it slowly creeps out of the horizon and illuminates the Earth all day long. But all this is only because the flow of time flows calmly. I will show you what the power of the Sands is capable of!

The vizier brought forward his staff, which he had been carrying all this time, and, clutching it tightly with his fingers, put it sonorously on the stones in front of him. Then something both miraculous and terrifying began to happen. Columns of Sand and dust shot up from under Amar's feet, his eyes lit up with a bright yellow light, the skin and air around him seemed to turn black. Then he closed his eyelids, and when he opened his eyes, everything was the same as it had been, only the air around the staff was sparkling and hot. Amar pointed to the sun and began to move upwards. And before the eyes of the amazed Prince, Farah and Essen, the sun, obeying the man, crept across the sky much faster than usual. The sight was absolutely incredible, grandiose and frightening. Man owned the whole world, he easily moved the solar disk across the sky!

A few seconds later, the sun stopped over the people's heads and everything was back to normal. But neither Prince, nor Farah, nor Essen were the same. What they saw amazed them. If any of them had studied himself carefully, he would have found that deep down he believed the vizier, at least partially. He believes in the power of the Sands. But, fortunately, this faith was too weak to prevail over any of them.

"I understand that you are surprised. But do not be afraid. I invite you to become a part of this immortal force! Leave your bodies and connect your consciousness with the Sands! Prince, give me the dagger! Amar tried to take advantage of the confusion.

-No! Hear? No! We don't believe you! The Prince shouted back. Inwardly, he was so determined that he was ready to lone against Amar and his army. He took a few steps forward and immediately regretted it: several arrows whistled past him, almost piercing him. A second of thought, and the Prince went on, but suddenly he heard a cry of pain behind him. He turned back with a terrible guess - one of the arrows pierced Essen. What the vizier had said just recently began to come true. Does this mean that Farah will soon perish too? And then he? And he will get a dagger. And... Dagger! The prince was seized with delight.

"How could I forget?" he thought.

The prince tried to concentrate as quickly as possible and remembered what had happened a few seconds ago - he shouted

something to the vizier and went to him. He remembered with what fury he had spoken those words, how uncomfortably the stone lay under his left foot, how he had begun to feel the heat of the noonday sun. And he swam back through these memories. He saw the arrows float backwards, as he himself took steps backwards.

"Enough," the Prince suddenly thought to himself. He could already feel that he was getting sick - this time his time back in time was the longest compared to the rest of the attempts.

When time flowed normally again, the Prince felt dizzy and staggered, almost falling. Then he looked to the side and saw Essen alive, unaware of anything. Then he looked at Amar and was horrified by his eyes: only the Prince could read in them - he also knew what had happened now. However, Amar ignored this and continued:

"It's just fun. Time can not only move the sun. Time decides who lives and who dies. And all these walls and vaults are also subordinate to him.

In confirmation of his words, the vizier drew a circle in the air, and gray spots began to creep everywhere, crumbling the stone. Turning around for a second, the Prince was horrified - the palace from which they had recently left had instantly turned from a shining white building into a gray block of stone, ready to crumble in a light breeze. Somewhere there were huge gaping holes, somewhere there were collapsed stones. Even the wall on which they stood was no longer as reliable as it had seemed before. And everything around was collapsing and breaking, turning into ruins.

-Quite! Amar said. "Do you want the same fate?" Well, that's your choice!

Looking at them predatorily, he began to wave his staff again, this time with some peculiar fierceness. The prince knew that something had to be done. But he tried the way forward, and it did not show good hope. Back? Escape? Then they will simply be killed in the back. Or the vizier will invent something else.

The sand warriors behind Amar melted into one single mass, like a cloud hanging over him. It seemed that his eyes were spraying lightning and soon this element would hit them.

"And don't hope that you will be able to do it again!" Amar shouted to Fare.

A terrifying cloud hid half the sky, covered the tower, and was about to hide the sunlight from them.

But suddenly, something went wrong. Instead of growing, the storm began to subside. The vizier's eyes flashed with rage and incomprehension.

-How?! This cannot be! He roared.

He struck the stones with his staff and pointed the head of the serpent at its end in the direction of Pharah. Immediately after that, a

sand stream rushed towards her, but jumping to the side, the girl escaped from imminent death.

In the next second, a strange roar was heard, and from somewhere below, breaking the already destroyed wall, some creature jumped out, almost twice the size of each of the people. Stones and debris were scattered around, one of which almost hit the Prince. Several others flew at the vizier, but turned to dust before they could get close to him. Unlike the others, Amar was not frightened, but on the contrary, he smiled mysteriously. A terrible guess came to the Prince's head, which was confirmed in a second:

"Prepare for death, Prince!" He came for you!

In front of the Prince stood a tall monster that resembled a man's physique, but his skin was black and as if burned, cut with strange patterns, and long tentacles were visible from behind his back.

Terrified, the Prince began to slowly step back. But instead of rushing at him, the strange beast stood still.

"I won't have to spend much time on you!" Dahaka knows his business! Amar said and laughed loudly as he began to gather the sand cloud above his head again.

But his plans were not destined to come true. The beast did not move towards the Prince, but instead let out a terrifying roar, emitting a dazzling white flash that instantly calmed the storm created by the vizier. This time the confidence in his gaze faded.

"It can't be! he thought to himself. "I don't understand!"

Amar could find no explanation for what was happening. The beast, roaring even harder, moved towards him. Its long tentacles were everywhere - anyone who was hit by such a blow could easily be cut in two.

Blocks of stone flew at the vizier one after another, forcing him to wave his staff every second, protecting himself from hits, and retreat. His eyes were wide open, and his pupils were nervously darting from side to side. Any of his attempts to attack were nullified by the onslaught of the monster.

Inflamed by the battle, the beast began to break off blocks from the wall. In his actions, not only an attack was visible - he deliberately destroyed the wall. And finally, after several powerful blows from the strange monster, the wall in this place collapsed - it did not reach the ground, and below you could see the road, covered with debris.

The path to the tower was cut off: the hole in the wall became too large in a few seconds.

-Run! Essen shouted. There was no panic in his voice. He came up with something. Although it was really dangerous to stay here: at any second, the beast could rush at them. "I know another way!"

The prince and Farah listened to him and ran after him. Meanwhile, the monster, driving the vizier away, rushed after them, overcoming the huge breach with one giant leap, landing heavily on the other side - the sound resembled the clink of metal.

Essen, hearing him, stopped and turned around. Seeing that the beast was on this side and chasing them, he ran again behind the Prince and Farah.

But Dahaka, after covering a short distance, stopped. He stopped, but did not calm down. Raising his huge fists into the sky, he unleashed a blow of colossal force, which almost knocked down the fleeing and caused the ground to shake. The wall began to collapse, collapsing in whole blocks. Even Prince, Essen and Farah, who fled with all their might, could not have time to fall down. Especially Essen, who ran behind.

Dahaka turned to Amar again, but he had already disappeared - he knew that he could not cope with such power as the beast possessed.

If anyone looked at him now, they would see that he jumped down from the wall and moved somewhere in an incomprehensible direction.

The Running Prince felt that the thoughts in his head were exploding with terrible force. He lost the threads of what was happening - it ceased to obey any laws. That beast, Dahaka, he was supposed to kill him, but... But why didn't he do it? Why didn't what the vizier said happen? Why did the monster attack Amar in the first place, saving them?

But the fast running, the terrible sounds behind him, and the sharp inhalations and exhalations hindered him, and he was constantly lost his way, and then he was driven more by fear. Incomprehensible, inexplicable, but it had a completely clear image.

Soon the Prince and Farah reached what they thought was a safe place where the wall would not collapse. The prince turned and in an instant noticed that there was no one behind him, and Essen was running over the falling boulder and was about to fall with it.

-Faster! He shouted to him.

Essen, already aware of what was happening, rushed forward even faster, squeezing the rest of his strength out of himself. Almost reaching his goal, he felt the ground slipping away from under his feet faster and faster. Shouting desperately, he jumped forward...

He came to his senses only when he felt that something was pulling him up. When he opened his eyes, he realized that he was holding on to the hand of the Prince, who was dragging him up the ledge with all his might, not letting him fall. Essen threw up his other hand, clinging to the edge, and, clinging to the bumps with his feet, began to quickly climb up. A few foggy, not fully realized moments of

the struggle for life, and now he is already lying on his stomach on the stones, saved from falling. Turning over on his back, because it was difficult to breathe, he saw both the Prince and Farah. The prince was still holding his hand. He saved him again, but this time Essen knew it. And clutching his arm tighter, he stood up, saying:

-Thank you. But this does not change anything!

"We need to get to the tower as soon as possible!" Lead us the other way, every second counts now! said the Prince. This was the case before, but now the situation has become even more frightening.

"Let's go," Essen said. "We need to go to that tower over there," he pointed to the nearest one, "go down it, and we will find ourselves at the second road to the Tower of Dawn!" Forward!

With a brisk step, Farah and the Prince followed. The Prince had time to think again. It turned out that not everything was under the control of the vizier here. This monster obeys something even higher. Or nothing at all and chooses what to do. But what if he attacked them next time? It was simply impossible to cope with such power, even if Amar was frightened and fled. But it turned out that the beast saved them? Why would he do it if he had to kill the Prince? This time the Prince did not doubt the truth of the vizier's words, even though they contradicted reality.

"What did he mean when he said that this dagger controls time?" Essen asked, out of breath.

- It's true, I'm still surprised. It is enough to imagine something from the past, and you are transported into it. If it was a few seconds ago, you relive them, if it was a long time ago, then you just remember anything, even if you have already forgotten something," the Prince answered.

"And these tricks with the sun - can a dagger do that?" Essen's voice sounded not only surprised, but also interested.

"No, it only moves time backwards and in very small segments," the Prince answered, thinking that he had just saved Essen's life, and he did not even notice it. And, probably, for the best. No one noticed, only the vizier's gaze was somehow suspicious. Only the one who holds the dagger in his hands notices what is happening.

Farah walked in silence. Her gaze was frightened and detached at the same time. What was she thinking? About the past that she lost? Surely she wanted to turn everything around, just as the Prince had described, so that everything would fall into place, and thus put an end to all this chaos. If they get to the Clock, these creatures will disappear and Amar will be no more dangerous than an ordinary human, losing his power and connection with the Sands. She wasn't sure about it, it was just her guess, but she sincerely wished for it. And she hoped that the Prince would be able to help her with this.

She had seen more than once that she could not defeat the vizier alone.

The Prince thought the same thing: what would happen next when they reached their goal? He was haunted by an overly bold thought that was based on a simple belief in the best. Maybe the Clock should be destroyed along with the Sands inside? But how? The only thing that seemed to him at all possible was to hide them from people once and for all, for example, to bury them at the bottom of the sea. This idea excited the Prince in some way, since it seemed to him quite easy to implement.

"What will happen when we get to the tower?" Essen asked suddenly, as if he had guessed the general mood. "I understand that we need to somehow return these Sands inside the Clock, but how exactly?"

"I don't know exactly. But I don't think it's so difficult, since the vizier is so afraid of it. He is afraid of the dagger in my hands and wants to get it," the Prince said. "He tried his best to warn me against trying to do it on my own. So that's exactly what I should do!"

"What if it's a trap?" Essen answered, raising his voice. "What if you make it worse?"

At first, the prince did not know what to answer. Essen voiced his greatest fears aloud. His words were in many ways similar to the vizier's warnings and therefore made even more obvious.

"What if everything really goes wrong?" thought the Prince.

"But we have no choice, what else can we do?" Better to try than wait for one of the monsters to kill us," the Prince was finally found. "And why would the vizier move the Clock to the top of the tower when it was possible to finish everything in the throne room?"

"He's right," Farah said. "We have no other way."

This time Essen pondered. What good is it if they doubt and look for something else that can fix everything? We need to use this chance, even though it is doubtful. Although he once again did not like to agree with the Prince, he still forced out of himself:

"Okay, let's go."

The only thing he didn't understand was why didn't the vizier just send more monsters to get the dagger by force? The prince will never be able to cope with a hundred monsters. And even the three of them can't cope. This means that the vizier had some kind of weakness. For example, this monster, Dahaka, he did not obey Amar. Surely he was afraid of losing control of everything and acted cautiously. He was much better at deception and intimidation than brute force. This conclusion reassured Essen. And Farah and the Prince simply do not understand how lucky they are with the enemy. And the Prince, in general, seems to think that he can do anything.

Although it was worth admitting that entering into an open fight with the Prince was a dangerous idea. He is a strong opponent.

Meanwhile, the prince was pondering what he should do when they made their way into the treasury. If the dagger could manipulate time by absorbing Sand, then maybe by combining it with the Clock, with its vast reserves of Sand, it could go back as far back in time as it wished? But where is the point where everything went wrong? Will the Clock have enough power to take Farah with him?

In the meantime, they had descended the stairs to the level below and were heading towards a small bridge on the way to the tower that Essen had spoken of. The middle of the bridge was wooden and was raised by ropes - probably in case of an attack to prevent the enemy.

Suddenly, somewhere in front of them, the sound of hooves was heard. Any extraneous sound did not bode well now. After that, there was a neighing, but it was somehow vile, piercing.

-Run! Faster! The Prince shouted, waving his hand towards the bridge.

At that moment three riders on horseback jumped out to meet them, two with halberds with sharp bayonets at the end, and one archer, who was already aiming at them. The horses on which they sat were terrifying by their very appearance - yellow predatory eyes, smoking nostrils, incredible power in every movement.

"Cut the rope from the other side!" Essen shouted to the Prince as he ran.

The wooden part of the bridge was raised, and there was no time to lower it with levers. And if they made it to the tower, they would have a chance to break away.

Drawing his sword, the Prince struck the rope as he ran, causing the wooden bridge to creak loudly. A moment later, Essen cut the second one, and the bridge collapsed down, throwing clouds of dust into the air and hitting the stone loudly.

All three ran on at full strength, but the riders were faster. Seeing the approaching shadow, the Prince tried to jump to the side, looking back, but suddenly stumbled - one of the planks unsuccessfully bent from the fall. The dagger he was holding in his hand flew out and, clattering against the stone, rolled on, not far from the entrance to the tower.

Falling on his stomach, the Prince turned around. At the same time, he saw a horse looming over him, which would have trampled him in a second, and an archer who, after the first unsuccessful shots, was aiming at Essen again. He ran straight, and it was not difficult to hit him. As the Prince rolled sideways and dodged the impact of his hooves, he saw two heavy arrows fly after Essen and pierce him through. He took a few more steps, and he collapsed to

the ground, screaming in pain. The prince shuddered: he had seen many deaths, but it was one thing to kill an enemy, and another to see death... Other. Or at least an ally. Despite all his anger and arrogance.

But suddenly something happened that abruptly made the Prince turn his attention to himself. He did not notice how he rolled to the edge of the boards and almost fell down. At the last moment, he managed to cling to the edge with his hand. But it was impossible to stay in such a state for a long time. In a moment, he would have been thrown down. Throwing up his other hand, he pulled himself up, rested on one leg and jumped to the side, grabbing the rope he had recently cut off in the air. Flying it under the bridge, he grabbed one of the ledges on the stone pillar of the bridge. Quickly climbing it, he soon reached the top. Placing both hands on the stone railing and resting his feet, the Prince made a sharp jerk and swung over them. The dagger lay at his feet, but before he could bend down for it, one of the riders reappeared in front of him with his halberd raised to strike. The prince rushed back and suddenly heard the whistle of an arrow. But it did not fly at him, but past him from behind him. He turned around and saw that Farah was shooting.

"She's alive!" - joyfully flashed through his head.

Turning around, he saw that the rider had fallen from his horse and, like many of his enemies he had killed before, was melting into thin air. Choosing between the opportunity to run away and fight, the Prince chose the latter: luck drove him into battle. He grabbed his dagger, then picked up the rider's weapon from the ground and jumped on his horse. Turning it sharply, the Prince rushed towards the archer. He was already holding an arrow at the ready. The prince quickly dived down, exposing his mount to the shot. After hitting, the unfortunate animal let out a scream and began to fall, and right under the hooves of the archer's horse. Being not far from the edge, he fell down, and the Prince, who made another dash and jumped on the back of the second horse, was already ready to deal with the third enemy. The prince pushed off with all his strength and jumped on the rider, throwing him to the ground. His horse ran on and disappeared somewhere.

Farah fired another arrow, but it whistled past the heads of the Prince and the monster that the Prince had already knocked down. He shouted to Farah:

"I'll handle it myself!"

And immediately he was thrown to the edge. Barely clinging to it, the Prince instantly climbed back, but his gaze managed to catch the height below him, really frightening him and bringing him closer to reality - he could easily break off from any rash action. And as soon as he had time to feel the firmament under his feet, he saw that the

point was flying at him, sparkling deadly in the sun. The prince ducked sharply, and then grabbed his halberd. She flew with such force that she easily threw him off the ground. Taking advantage of this and the confusion that arose from the enemy, he soared into the air and fell on top of him, thrusting his dagger into his back.

The monster was pulled back from the blow. In an instant from the fall, the Prince jumped over the already dying enemy, forcefully pushing him with both legs closer to the edge. It fell and, not reaching the ground, mixed with the air.

The prince, unable to control himself, fell, instead of getting to his feet, as he had hoped. After that, he immediately jumped up, as if waiting for more attacks. But there was no one around but him and Farah. And the dead Essen. Remembering what had happened a moment ago, he felt a surge of anger - he wanted revenge. The prince had saved Essen three times, but now he couldn't. He felt guilty and powerless to change anything. Almost like then, with his father.

Farah saw it all. And the whole picture of the battle. I saw Essen die. What was in her head? For sure, there is just as much grief, if not even more. She, too, remembered the vizier's warning words, and it seemed to her that they were beginning to be fulfilled: happy accidents were no longer happening. Therefore, Farah was terribly afraid for the Prince. When he first disappeared from sight, her heart froze: she decided that he had fallen. And this thought caused her even greater pain, incomprehensible to herself. And every time the Prince was one step away from death, Farah screamed, partly because she was unable to help. The prince had indeed proved by his deeds that he deserved her trust. He saved her, saved Essen. She did not have time to understand Essen or become attached to him. But the Prince became something special for young Farah in just a day. It was a new feeling for her, bitter and sweet at the same time. She did not quite understand how this happened and whether it was possible under other circumstances. The sand was the cause of her grief and the reason for their acquaintance. He changes everything so much. Maybe it sharpens the senses as well? And they understand each other's words so easily - is it possible?

Meanwhile, the Prince succumbed to despair even more. He squeezed the dagger forcefully and concentrated his mind on its strength, on the recent fight, trying to do the impossible. When he closed his eyes, it was as if he could see all the Sand around him. I wanted to grab every speck of it to collect more Sand and win back at least a couple of minutes from time. Now he felt the power of the dagger and even thought that he could master the same magic as the vizier. It seemed to him that he saw streams of Sand rushing towards the dagger. But everything did not go as he expected, and despair obscured his vision for too long, until it was too late. A cloud of Sand

began to form around it. Exactly the same as the one he had plunged into as he wandered along the balcony by the throne room. The same one in which his mysterious dream and miraculous, unusual healing remained. But now he knew enough about the treachery of the Sands and the vizier (what if he had arranged it?) that he tried to break free from the fog that enveloped him. But it was too late.

The cloud flared up sharply and increased in size. Farah shouted something excitedly, but the Prince was already consumed by the familiar (but now unpleasant) feeling of consciousness dissolving and everything around him disappearing, so he didn't hear. And he could not do anything, did not know how to break free from these shackles.

Farah saw Sand hurl the Prince into the air, upside down. As he spread his arms to the sides, and Sand seemed to climb inside him through his mouth, nose and eyes. At the same time, the Sand became less and less, and the Prince smoothly descended to the ground. He was unconscious.

The prince plunged into the abyss of strange visions. But, this time, they were different. Clearer and more understandable. He saw himself and Farah in them, he saw everything as if from the outside. I saw all the angry looks of Farah and the way she stole glances at the dagger. Then his gaze shifted to the future, where he saw either his death or himself, lying unconscious. And Farah, who came up without a shadow of a doubt and took the dagger. After that, darkness thickened, and he couldn't see anything else, only felt that he couldn't get out of this abyss on his own. As if he was alive, but forever stuck in this darkness.

When the Prince woke up, he felt somehow embittered and deceived. Everything was in vain. But after another second, he suddenly realized that his head was on Farah's lap. He felt the warmth of her hand stroking his hair.

"Please don't leave me, my love. Please, don't leave me, now..." whispered Farah, barely holding back her tears. All this time she stayed with him, without closing her eyes. Evening came, the first stars lit up in the sky.

The prince was dumbfounded. He opened his eyes, turned and raised his head slightly, and, not quite sure of what he had heard, asked:

"What did you call me?"

Chapter 19. Plan

Amar paced the room from corner to corner, angrily thinking about everything that had happened. He was looking for if not explanations, then at least a way out of the situation. The brilliant plan was crumbling before our eyes. It crumbled like a house of cards. Everything went wrong from the very beginning. He did not have time to take possession of the dagger in time. The prince got to him first, and it ruined all plans. Amar had been ill for a long time and longed for the dagger. He was to help him heal. The sands had tremendous power, they were powerful. He read Namtar's diary up and down. He knew their capabilities, their strengths and weaknesses. But Amar had no dagger.

At first, everything was not so bad. He managed to trick the Prince into opening the Sands, releasing them from imprisonment in a huge clock. This was a great revenge on Shahraman for breaking his word.

The staff he brought from the Isle could also control the Sands. That was enough. Sand obeyed. I listened to his will as it was described in the diary. And the Sand gave him strength. His years of cough were gone, and his strength soaked his body again. Ancient magic worked. But then failures fell one after another. He met the Prince and tried to convince him to give him the dagger. He made up a wonderful story about the Indian Maharaj, who was driven mad by the Sands of Time and was ready to unleash their wrath on the whole world. He skillfully won the Prince over to his side. Sand helped the vizier, and the Prince was easily suggestible at that moment: his mind was damaged by the Sands, they infected him from the inside. It was clear that he was fighting, because he had not become a sand monster. Maybe the dagger was protecting him, or maybe something else. But then the first miscalculation happened. His strength was not enough, and Amar betrayed himself and his plans. And there was something wrong with the Prince. Where did he have so much strength to doubt? And when these ill-fated birds flew into the hall, it was already difficult to explain anything. Well, at least hiding the Clock here in the Tower of Dawn was a great idea.

And then the Prince found this mean girl somewhere. How he hated her all this time. And her father! Constant orders, not a single quiet day for a sick old man. But everything turned out to be even worse: she could compete with his power! She was able to stop a sandstorm in the desert, though she didn't seem to realize it at the time. What kind of power lies in it? Is she aware of it now? Surely, if she was able to do it again. Perhaps she is even more dangerous than the Prince. The touch of the staff on her even temporarily weakened him!

The vizier felt trapped. Practically in prison, from which it is impossible to get out. Maybe he missed something important? Some detail in the diary that changes a lot? There were a few more blank pages at the end, but what can you find on the blank pages? He wanted to study the book again, but he suddenly discovered that it was missing. Another failure. Impotent anger overcame Amar, he gripped his staff tighter than usual, but it seemed to be good only for the most harmless amusements, such as disappearing or moving the sun across the sky. Even in order to properly control the army of sand soldiers, the strength of the staff was not enough. Small detachments obeyed him, but it was enough to summon at least a couple of dozen monsters, and everything went wrong. They disappeared without permission or did whatever they wanted. If he had loosened his grip a little, they would have attacked him. The sands did not recognize the owner of the staff as their master. The vizier could only mislead with his help. To deceive, to intimidate - and nothing more. For example, when he met the Prince, Farah, and who knows who else (how did he survive without becoming a monster?), the army of monsters behind him was just an illusion, as if the vizier was just a street magician entertaining passers-by. And the Prince was able to defeat those birds too. Something stronger, more effective was needed. But he did not have enough power over the Sands. And, as one of the entries in the diary said, the owner of the dagger could turn the attacker's power against him. And then the vizier would not have coped. This fact about Peski and the dagger was a little dubious, strange, but indirectly it was confirmed. In any case, the vizier did not want to test it on his own skin.

His greatest hope at that time was Dahaka. In the diary, it seems, almost nothing was said about him (of course, Namtar was so careful with the Sands!). But other books have told enough about it. And the meager crumbs of knowledge that he was able to pull out of the Sands confirmed everything he had read about. Deciding to let the Sands out of the Clock on their own was a risky business. This is punishable by death. And Amar knew it very well. Dahaka, the guardian of time, always comes for those who interfere with the passage of time and destroys them. Pulls out of the flow and restores the correct course of the wheel of time. And it was a great stroke of luck that the Prince released the Sands himself. Despite all the other setbacks, the vizier could only wait for Dahaka to come for the Prince.

But it was with Dahaka that his main disappointment was associated. Why did this great power fail thousands of years later? This is impossible, he does not lose his strength, he is immortal, he is out of time. Dahaka knows no mercy, pity and compassion. He only does what he is meant to do. An hour-long flow of time and a harsh

executioner for violators. It does not matter to him who has the dagger - he does not control it in any way. But what then stopped him from attacking the Prince? Moreover, Dahaka directed his force against the vizier, although he himself hardly claimed to be the violator. He did not do even half of what was in the teachings of Namtar. Does this girl really have such incredible strength? Amar could not understand it. He was really frightened by all this. And now the Prince is alive, the dagger is still in his possession. And Farah is with him, they are clearly on the same page, no matter what. And Dahaka, it seems, does not threaten them in the slightest.

Driven into a dead end, he lost! Soon everything will end and not in the best way for him. All his deceptions seem to have been exposed. As if it wasn't he who read the Prince's mind, but the other way around. How powerful is this dagger? It seems that this young man has already learned his ability to manage time. What if he goes even further? Or this girl - what if she becomes even stronger? So much so that he will not only be able to stop his magic, but also learn to turn it against him?

The vizier asked the same questions and could not find a place for himself. It was necessary to do something, to come up with some new plan of counteraction. What if these two were not so strong separately? But how can they be separated if they are united in the face of the enemy, no matter what? Amar's own powerlessness angered him desperately. He felt his body weaken again, the urge to cough - the disease followed him relentlessly and further weakened his already modest power over the Sands.

Why couldn't he be healed? After all, Namtar, according to the records, was healthy on the first morning after meeting the Sands. Maybe he did something special? What he kept silent about in his diary? Or is he just lucky? But further entries refute this! All the half-human, half-monsters that were created on the Island gained tenfold strength and were distinguished by good health, although they gave part of their soul to the Sands. Maybe that's the point? But how is this possible? And how did Namtar himself do it?

And again the vizier did not find answers. The sands betrayed him. His hopes were disappointed. The dagger that had called out to him at night and whispered to him about the Sands had forgotten to mention that without it, the Sands would not reveal its power.

And yet he must do something. Try, at least by simple deception, to stop the Prince and Farah. They were clearly heading towards the tower and seemed to know what to do. He needs to try to defend the tower. It will create a huge sand sphere around its top. An insurmountable barrier that he will erect by trying to concentrate as much as possible on the power of the staff. Perhaps he was not diligent enough? Was he clumsy and disrespectful with great power?

This time he will not be in a hurry and will not be scattered over trifles. Except that there is one more thing to finish before that - to separate the Prince and Farah. To sow fear in their hearts, to confuse them, was not enough. They were too eager for revenge.

And then an insight came to the vizier. A plan formed in his head. A simple one, like the one he used in the beginning, forcing the Prince to open the Hourglass. The vizier knew that Sand leaves irreversible changes in a person. A kind of abyss in his soul. And he only needs to push the Prince to this abyss.

The only thing that really worked, over which the vizier had power, was the cups. Namtar was indeed a genius, although he did not seem to appreciate his achievements enough. He studied Peski for a long time and with passion, he penetrated into such secrets that a vizier without a diary could hardly ever know. Through them, he could see distant parts of the palace and influence his servants. For real, and not the way it turned out with the vizier with the sand monsters. Through the bowls, it was even possible to control the extent to which the Sands penetrated a person. And therefore, after the transformation, he could control this half-human, half-monster. Even those monsters that were around now listened to Amar when they were near this cup. He would take advantage of this and lure the Prince into a trap! His clouded mind will turn him against Farah. Distrust and suspicion will increase a hundredfold, visions will turn her image into an enemy, and he will kill her with his own hands. This should knock down the Prince so much that in anger he will lose his mind and fall into the abyss. Become one of the monsters or something. The sand will swallow him from the inside, fanning despair, anger and fear in him. And nothing will stop it, not even her touch. All that remains is to take the dagger.

The vizier was especially pleased that the cup would do all this by itself. His plan was extremely simple and elegant. The reflection that the cup shows flows into the real world and devours a person. The vizier only needs to lure the Prince, call him closer to the chalice, taking advantage of the darkness, the trace that the Sands left in the Prince's soul. And, perhaps, everything will happen as he wants. It must happen! Even if Farah escapes and escapes, they will at least be separated. And he can cope with it alone. And he will easily take away the dagger. She would be too frightened to put up serious resistance.

The vizier smiled sweetly and began to carefully think over the details of his new, salutary plan. But what to do when the dagger fell into his hands, he had thought about it for a long time and knew very well. He had never been as determined as he was now. And he will stop at nothing.

Chapter 20. Black

Farah responded with silence and a penetrating look, not devoid of the timidity that was so engraved in the Prince's memory. Seeing that look again, even more sensual and tender, he felt dizzy.

"It doesn't matter!" You're not to blame for anything! You've done everything you could. Are you all right? Try to get up! Farah tried to bring the Prince back to his senses. "What happened?" Have you seen anything?

The prince, hearing the words float past him in a vague echo, made an effort and finally stood up.

"I don't remember anything again," said the Prince, struggling with gloomy thoughts and banishing all doubts.

"I'm so tired," Farah said, changing the subject. "Please, give me at least a couple of hours." I'll try to sleep. And you guard me, okay?

The prince wanted to answer something, he even had an idea like "Rest? Right away? A couple of steps from the goal?", but he understood that Farah was really having a hard time. Well, he will have a little more time to reflect on what he saw in his vision. He himself did not want to sleep - his body rested while he was unconscious. And nothing could help his mind, except for one thing. Now he was looking at the dozing girl and thinking about what she had said.

He noticed that he had unwittingly become attached to Farah. He was responsible for her life, and it helped him. They went through many difficulties, making their way side by side through the palace to the tower. Essen was also nearby, but he was always dissatisfied, embittered and in no way disposed to communicate. And while Farah also seemed arrogant and of character at times, he took it as a challenge. But in spite of everything, she remained an almost defenseless and frightened girl who needed support. Now the Prince was thinking, "I could marry her. She is also of royal blood!" In this matter, he reasoned like a child, although his feelings were genuine.

For a second, it seemed to the Prince that everything around him was melting away and a wonderful garden appeared around him, everything was flooded with the soft silver light of the full moon. And he and Farah walk leisurely among this splendor, silently, occasionally exchanging glances. Even Peski and the vizier ceased to be so important. Most clearly, the Prince felt his heart pounding wildly.

With great reluctance, he recalled that reality was not at all like his vision, that the vizier would not give up and would return. I wonder where he hides the rest of the time? And that they now had a chance to face Dahaka at every step ahead - this meeting meant certain death.

But together they found something that gave them at least some confidence, support under their feet. They found each other. And now they would never want to lose. But it is unlikely that the vizier will just retreat. Now he will just be careful and will not come himself, but he has a whole army of monsters in his power that will find and kill anyone. If the Prince can handle a ten, then he will send a hundred. And maybe more than one. Only one question could not be answered: why hadn't Amar done it yet?

Thoughts of the vizier aroused anger in him. Even Farah's presence didn't soften him. Anger, mingling with the suspicions of his vision, clouded his mind as clouds covered the entire sky that night, making it incredibly dark.

Not knowing exactly how much time had passed, the Prince decided to wake Farah.

"We've got to go," he said.

Farah got up and walked to the nearest window. It was still a long way before dawn, but the clouds had cleared a little, the stars were already fading, and the sky had lightened slightly. Sleep did not help her much, but it became easier to walk.

"I was afraid you wouldn't come back from your dream." You'll leave me alone," Farah said without turning.

"Let's go," the Prince said dryly. His tongue did not want to obey him, he could not express his thoughts and feelings.

They walked through the door closest to them, and after walking down a small corridor dimly lit through small latticed windows, Prince and Farah found themselves on a balcony inside a large hall. A little further down, two staircases led down, which joined into one wide one. The balcony on the other side of them turned into a closed zigzag staircase leading somewhere up. This hall reminded the Prince of the one in which he had met Faro, except that instead of a huge window, a stone wall grew out of the floor, and only here and there at the top were narrow elongated windows through which the light penetrated here. But it was quite enough: the hall was snow-white, and therefore it never seemed too dark, and the sun's rays during the day even made it dazzling.

The wall was decorated with a huge intricate pattern that intertwined the windows. It mixed green and yellow colors. There was not a drop of black in the entire hall. And it was very strange for the Prince that he felt uncomfortable from this. Perhaps he was not even aware of it, but there was an unquenchable desire to fight the darkness, to banish and conquer it. But now it seemed as if someone had done everything for him. But what if the darkness is not gone at

all? Hidden, hidden? And now he and Farah would go down the stairs and immediately find themselves surrounded by a crowd of monsters, each of which now seemed to the Prince a terrible shapeless spot, and always black and dirty. Yes, it is dirty. Any of these monsters seemed to stain the world with their existence. The world, until recently, was so beautiful, the same as this wonderful hall.

The prince looked at Faro. She gives him a whole world. Just as clean and dazzling. And he feels something wrapping around him, enveloping him and his heart. Hundreds of threads are woven around him, as if giving him some kind of protection and confidence. Confidence that he can handle anything. With any enemy sent by the vizier, with the Sands themselves, even if they completely unleash their wrath on him. But sometimes a person searches too much for what is easy for him to cope with, not seeing what is really dangerous. The prince is constantly looking around and looking for darkness. But what if she is where he does not expect at all?

And, as if echoing his thoughts, strange flashes and visions begin to flash in the Prince's mind. Here he sees the vizier, but his face seems very strange. It looks at the young man with incomprehensible triumph. And the Prince himself loses his hatred for this face for a few moments, and instantly everything is covered with darkness, he feels dizzy and almost falls.

"What's wrong with you?" He hears Farah's anxious voice.

-No problem... it's all right," the Prince replies, unable to explain what is happening.

A moment ago, this voice was infinitely pleasant to him, but now he sees something different in himself. He doubts whether he wanted to hear that voice. Or did he want to drown in his vision, get entangled in his nets and remain in this darkness? Farah kept him on the brink. But the boundaries between what and what? After all, he does not stand at the edge of an abyss into which he can fall, but walks on a hard marble floor. All these strange doubts seemed to pull him in different directions. The prince restrained himself, trying not to show it. He didn't want to scare Farah. What happens to him will surely pass, her love will warm him, and he will forget his visions.

But the feeling of uncertainty did not recede, the Prince began to think that the floor under his feet seemed liquid, viscous and he was gradually drowning in it.

"Please, explain to me what's going on?" I see that you don't seem to be yourself! Farah's words were filled with barely restrained tears and genuine excitement. "Is it because I—"

-Us... We need to move on. There! The prince suddenly threw his hand forward and pointed to something. From this side, it looked like a large bowl. From a distance it was already visible that a

strange smoke was spreading from it on the floor, reminiscent of morning fog.

Letting go of Farah's hand, the Prince moved forward even faster. He wanted to run, but he felt that he would not have enough strength, and it still seemed to him that he was stuck in the stone floor. For a moment, he noticed that the floor was much whiter and dazzling than the walls, and was outlined by a silver stripe around the edges. All this reminded him of the moon in the night sky. Regal, silvery-white, it stood out sharply among the darkness and millions of tiny lights.

Something was pulling the Prince forward. He felt that a huge knot was woven around him, and in order to untangle it, he had to look into this bowl. In some way he could not understand, he felt that Farah would not be able to help him now. And even he himself will not be able to. He himself is the main cause of this inexplicable contradiction, riddle.

Or maybe his father would tell him what to do? Oh, if only he were here! The prince shook again with impotent anger. Anger at himself, at the vizier, at what is happening. And immediately a whole stream of warm feelings poured into his soul through a small crack, the kind that move forward, no matter what. Fight! He must fight! Now he already felt that Farah could help him. But help him not win, but only gain courage and confidence to withstand any test, any blow of fate. She could support him, guide him, but not get rid of something. He is forced to win himself, it is only in his power. Why did Farah have such an effect on him? Is it easy to explain by the power of love, or is the mystery much more complex and lies beyond the boundaries of this world? If so, what kind of world is it? Are there people in it and what are they turned into? And will an ordinary person ever be able to realize at least part of this mystery, touch it or plunge into it?

Or maybe he was already allowed to penetrate this secret? And that's why these strange visions, incomprehensible feelings? Look into the bowl! As soon as possible! But how did he know what she was? He did not understand this, but confidence was already in him and firmly led him to the goal. But does this certainty belong to him?

The prince had long felt that everything that was happening was not limited to mere reality distorted by the Sands. There is something else, higher, hidden from view and eternally mysterious. And he, wrapping his hands around the warm stone from which the bowl was made, was ready to look into it and see... Truth? Answers to your questions? The way to solve all problems? Or the Great Mystery itself? Or maybe his lost dream? Every second of his life that he didn't remember? It was this that he shouted to Farah:

"I want to remember my dream!"

There was no answer.

The prince saw himself. His reflection, as if it were a mirror. In a moment he realized that this cup was really a mirror, placed here for some unknown reason, and in such a bizarre way. He saw not only his own face and hands, but also everything around him - the walls, the ceiling and... themselves! No, he saw not just his reflection, he seemed to be able to look into himself from within, he could touch his own soul. He saw this knot of incomprehensible contradictions in his eyes, which suddenly turned from blue to black and then gray, like his father's. As soon as the thought of his father flashed through his head, he saw him instead of himself. So alive, so close that the Prince immediately wanted to stretch out his hand and touch him. But instead, he felt a scorching cold: the mirror turned out to be something like water, but more viscous and unusually cold. Such that it was not so easy to escape back, and the most terrible thing was that for a second the thought slipped through the Prince's head that he either did not want to or could not - he could not figure it out - to disconnect from this mirror. And the cold crept somewhere under the skin, digging into the mind and clouding the consciousness.

"My son," the Prince heard a familiar voice. He saw his father talking to him, but the sound was not coming from his face, but from behind the Prince's back. He turned around, instantly filled with sweet hope, and saw his father in front of him. For a moment, it seemed strange to him that he could not see or hear Farah, but the thought passed him by almost unnoticed.

"How can this be?" thought the Prince, and yet some inner voice told him that after all that had already happened, there was nothing unexpected in it. Maybe Farah is just a vision? Maybe all this is just a dream, set up as a test? Or another deception of the vizier?

Taking a step towards his father, the Prince shuddered. The familiar features of the face suddenly ceased to be so, the skin began to dry out, crack, fire lit up in the eyes and something vile that hid the man the Prince loved.

Another step, and Shahraman turned into the same monster that the Prince had already killed once. What did it mean? Was he going to have to endure another fight? He didn't fear for his life—he knew he could win a second, third, or even tenth time—but he dreaded the feeling behind that victory—the pain of loss, of disappointment, of self-hatred. Is it really his fate from now on to experience the same destructive feelings forever, running around this vicious circle? What happens in the end?

All this time, the dagger was silent, and the Prince did not even think about it.

Suddenly, the monster's face crumbled—what the Prince could not describe in any other way—and the Prince saw the vizier. And at

the same moment he wanted to grab it with his bare hands and tear it apart, turn it into dust. His eyes filled with anger, and he ran to the vizier, but no matter how many steps the Prince took, the vizier was always a little at a distance and grinned hideously. This continued until the Prince was thrown back by something, knocking him off his feet. Getting up, he saw that Amar had become twice as tall as him and continued to grow, and with him the whole hall was growing, which, having retained its outlines, had become a nasty greenish-gray color, dark and cold.

-No! You can't take everything from me! The Prince regained his determination.

He felt his confidence grow and make him more than himself. Taller and larger, like a vizier. Catching up with him, the Prince drew his sword and swung. And so, when the blade was a moment away from the target, the Prince saw instead of the enemy... Faro! This instantly stopped the Prince and not only shattered his confidence, but destroyed it. What is going on? Who is he fighting against? Why did he see Farah if he saw and continues to see Amar? He was disgusted, and instantly wanted to get rid of it, because it was simply unbearable, wild. From the emotions that overwhelmed him, he roared like a beast and forcefully threw his sword to the floor. But he knew that this was not enough. Only one question was spinning in his head, requiring an immediate decision: "What to do?" And at that moment the answer came to the Prince: he saw how everything around him was blurring, the bowl was turning into a large puddle or even a lake and he, without hesitation, dived into it, leaving behind a distorted, unnatural reality in which he could no longer be. For a few more seconds, he seemed to free himself from the chains that bound him, then he felt a sharp surge of strength from an almost unexpected freedom, and fell into the darkness. For the first time it did not seem like oblivion to him, it was just dark and quiet around. Or rather, almost quietly - a familiar breath was heard nearby, from which the Prince's heart fluttered with joy again.

"Kakcolucchia," Farah said, and the Prince felt the touch of her warm hand.

Chapter 21. Castles in the clouds

"Dreams are really given to us for some reason, not just like that?"

-Yes.

"So why?"

"To see reality!"

"But don't we see it during the day, when we look around us with our own eyes, when we talk to someone?"

"Sleep helps to forget the unnecessary generated by the darkness of the mind, shows reality in a different form, not in the way we are used to and not in the way we would like. Bizarre, unrecognizable, exaggerated. But true!"

"Then why are they so quickly forgotten and lost?"

"You can't live on dreams alone, they'll drive you crazy instantly. But you can't do it without them at all. Your mind will rot, and you will rot with it!"

"So, then..."

-Yes!

A streak of moonlight slowly crept along the wall and appeared on Asha's face. With a slight wincing, he opened his eyes abruptly. He seems to have dozed off, but not for long. There was still no fear in his eyes. On the contrary, confidence in him has grown. Asha felt more alive than ever. And with it, his curiosity grew. He encountered something special, incredible. His life will not be the same, he has gone beyond ordinary life altogether!

Asha tried to restore the course of events. After a few moments, he realized that it was not so easy. He felt that he did not remember something and the fragments of memories did not want to line up in order. First, he remembered how he looked into the fountain and saw his reflection in the water. Instantly his thought leaped forward, and he found himself in front of the cup. Now he will look into it, lower his hand, and something will happen. After that, a hazy image appeared in front of him, and he saw again the strange white threads that entangled everything. Sliding along them, he finally got to the main thing - if he could not put something in order, it would be nice to find the most necessary thing - he had the idea of some kind of gift, of a guide who showed him the way. He saw it in the reflection!

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Asha wondered at himself - he had never thought about such a thing before and never tried to comprehend what was happening around him so deeply. But the flow of thoughts overwhelmed him. Now he understood. Now he understood everything! It was something of a test. Yes, he was in mortal danger; Yes, he was even a little frightened and almost died.

But he passed it. He passed at least because he is still alive and retained his sanity, which helped him realize what had happened. And this strange guide, whose presence he did not even feel, is still real. Yes, it is real! He showed him the way, and perhaps he will show him again!

Asha has already clearly defined that there are two forces that are beyond the line of human consciousness and capabilities. One of them was his gift and guide, and the other was monsters and something else. Something unified, huge and all-pervasive. And Asha understood that, having at least partially mastered the first force, he would be able to repulse the second. Now it's time to find the princess and save her. Now that he had found a weapon and was no longer so defenseless against the unknown.

Realizing all this, taking it as a fulcrum, indestructible and irrefutable, the Indian concentrated on what he himself called a gift. He saw souls leaving their bodies. Perhaps he was the reason for this. But how will it help him? Only Ajit could help him. But that horrible beast killed, literally destroyed him... Or not? Maybe his body is still lying there?

It was this question that Asha asked himself that gave birth to the most important idea in him. Or rather, it was the missing link in the chain. Several times he saw how the whole world turned into something mysterious, incomprehensible, how people became monsters, and saw his reflection in the water. Only now did Asha realize that they were almost the same thing. There is something called the present, and there is a reflection of it. And if the reflection of a person in the water is harmless and ordinary, then in other cases it can be terrible or unbelievable. At first, he wanted to call it the opposite, but Asha quickly dismissed that thought - it was a reflection. Only reflections can be absolutely similar to what they reflect, and distorted beyond recognition. And the only reflection of his gift, his ability to finally sever the connection between the soul and the body, was the ability to reconnect them. He'll bring Ajit back to life! He had seen the bowl work, and he could do it!

The only thing that was inaccessible to Asha's inner eye was the confidence with which he drew all his conclusions. This is not a simple hope or even certainty. That's faith. A person who acquires faith is able to follow it anywhere. And even if it requires reviving the dead, it will not stop the one who has found faith.

By touch, moving slowly and carefully, Asha found a way out. Coming out of the next corridor, he found himself in a beautiful garden. If it hadn't been for what had happened a few hours ago, nothing would have made him think at first that anything was going on at all. Peace and silence reigned around. But the silence was unusually all-encompassing, oppressive to the ear. The garden was

dead, and it was as different from the sleeping one as emptiness is from space. Therefore, Asha heard his every step, every random rustle. Confident, he still continued to be careful.

He had to decide where to go next. The crowns of trees overhanging his head hid almost everything from his view, Asha did not even see the palace, so he should have climbed somewhere higher.

Soon, the path along which he was walking turned to the side, skirting a sloping rock, almost bare, with here and there growing islands of greenery. The boulder seemed taller than the trees, and Asha decided to climb it to look around.

A light breeze appeared, and with it coolness - harbingers of the approaching morning. The grass was damp with dew and breathed freshness. The only thing missing was the pre-dawn chirping of birds.

When he reached the top of the cliff, Asha looked around. It turns out that he has gone far away from where he left Ajit. He was behind the palace now. Ahead of him was a huge grove, and behind it there were some buildings, low turrets, and behind all this, in the distance, towered a palace, the dark silhouette of which has not lost its impressiveness to this day. To Asha's right were cages - it was the Sultan's menagerie. On the largest, consisting of several tiers and closed at the top with a lattice dome (it seems that birds were kept in it), rods were torn out or bent in several places. Someone or something rushed out, leaving the twisted metal sticking out in different directions.

However, Asha examined all this briefly, his attention was almost instantly attracted by a high tower a little to the right and further than the palace. Despite the clear sky, on which the silvery moon and stars were visible, heavy black clouds thickened above it, now and then illuminated by flashes of giant lightning. One by one, they struck at the top of the tower, casting huge shadows on the ground, which had strange and sometimes monstrous outlines. And at the same time, a pulsating pillar of light burst out of the tower upwards, into the center of a huge funnel. The top of the tower was difficult to see because of the bright glow.

All of this reminded Asha of what she and Ajit had seen as they approached the city. But he had seen with his own eyes how a pillar of light struck the dome of the palace, and this time it was bursting out of the tower standing to the side of him. But whatever the case may be, this is probably the only place that can give him all the answers he needs and where they can stop all this chaos. Yes, it was them, he and Ajit - Asha had no doubt that he would succeed in his unbelievable, at first glance, plan. Therefore, he immediately decided that he should not hesitate and find Ajit's body as soon as possible.

As he turned back to descend—the other slope was precipitous and impossible to descend—he heard a growing rumble behind him, accompanied by a trembling of the earth. Turning sharply, Asha saw that some waves were running down the tower, the strength of which was growing closer to the ground. Upon reaching it, the waves grew into a gigantic storm and rushed in all directions of the tower with double speed.

Asha didn't even have time to think about how lucky he was to be so far away from the tower. He threw himself down, slipping on his dew-damp feet, and without hesitation threw himself behind a stone lying at the foot of the tower, and fell to the wet ground, covering his head with his hands and pressing his side against the stone. After a moment, he felt a blow of colossal force shake the rock. The crack of breaking stones was heard, the tremor of the earth intensified several times. And in another moment, a sand whirlwind covered everything around. A storm, like the one that sometimes occurs in deserts. Nothing was heard except a shrill rumble and whistling. If it were not for him, then you would certainly hear how tree trunks break, stones roll and split. But the storm swallowed it all up. Nothing but her.

Trying not to lose his reasonable calm, Asha waited for it to end. Any storm must end, he knew that. It could not be otherwise. And indeed, soon the hum subsided, and Asha got up from his knees, shaking off the sand and realizing that he was sorely lacking a breath of fresh air. But after taking the first breath, he felt a lot of grains of sand and dust sticking to his throat from the inside and not allowing him to breathe. Asha coughed, trying to spit out the nasty dust.

The garden around it was almost completely destroyed - many trees were uprooted, small piles of sand were visible everywhere, covering the grass.

"We can't wait any longer!" thought Asha and ran. He had time to remember where he needed to go, and he also ran because he was less in danger that way. But two things prevented him from moving quickly - sand and branches under his feet, which made every step difficult and dangerous. And the dust in the air, which had not yet settled, not only interfered with breathing, but also clogged in his eyes, which made Asha see everything in front of him rather blurry. It seemed that the dust was not going to settle at all, and someone, on the contrary, was pouring more and more on top. Like rain.

The menagerie seemed much closer now, and because of that, it began to pose a greater danger - Asha did not know and did not want to know what kind of creatures could be there. Those that he had already met were enough for him.

Soon he ran out of the place where the garden had once been, and immediately felt that it became easier to run, because his feet stopped getting stuck in the sand and clinging to anything.

Suddenly, some strange dull sounds were heard behind him. Asha turned around and saw that tall pillars of sand suddenly burst out of the ground, and, at the same time, he had a feeling that the ground under his feet was becoming somehow unreliable, ready to collapse in an instant and carry everything into the abyss.

Asha crossed the wide road that separated the garden from the residential part of the palace, still hearing claps behind him. What is this? Is the ground really about to give way under your feet?

Jumping into an alley and making a few turns at random, Asha found himself in a small courtyard, surrounded on four sides by a rectangular house, with a long balcony that inseparably encompassed all four walls and propped up at the bottom by sparsely planted columns. Crossing it, Asha wondered why he hadn't met a single monster yet. The thought delighted him, but at the same time it surprised him immensely. Could it be because the wave destroyed not only the trees and some houses, but also scattered the monsters themselves to dust? So, this is not a killer wave? She saved him. But who caused it? Is it really him?

Asha had boundless faith in his mysterious savior and was ready to attribute to him every good fortune that happened to him. But he did not think about whether he was ready for failure, believing that the most terrible and terrible thing had already happened to him. And now he and some unknown force that had opened the way for him to the Gift must make amends for what had happened.

Sometimes dreams replace reality or creep into it so boldly that it is difficult to distinguish between dream and reality. But what happens to them? After all, reality also gets into them, they are built on it. Would there be dreams if there was no reality? Would there be reality if there were no dreams? Can opposites exist without each other? And are dreams as unreal as they seem?

When Ajit woke up, he felt a pleasant lightness throughout his body. His heart was beating smoothly and calmly. The soft twilight did not press on my eyes, but only calmed me down even more. But I didn't want to sleep anymore. It seemed to Ajit that he had rested for a lifetime. He rested not only with his body, exhausted by a long journey, a fight with a monster, but also with a soul, wounded and tormented.

Of course, he remembered every detail in his dream, remembered every step he took, every random thought that hovered

in his head. And most importantly, he remembered the peace that seized him and did not let go until now. But despite the seeming sleepiness, he was ready for anything. If there was another battle now, he was ready! He can walk forward, he can breathe deeply.

Why, immersed in the past, from which he had been running all this time, did Ajit finally find peace for his soul? Why did it not torment him more? It allowed me to hug me tightly with all my heart for the last time and melted away in the evening mist. Maybe because he didn't drive him away? He did not think about his pain, did not think about what was and will be. He allowed something close and dear to nourish him, opened his soul wide open and... Woke up. It was a pity that it was just a dream that had nothing to do with reality.

Getting to his feet, Ajit walked to the exit of the room, peering into the darkness. He was afraid that Dahaka would burst out of somewhere and anything could happen. But the way the monster behaved amazed Ajit unspeakably. He knew that something was happening to the beast, but he couldn't even imagine what it was. He remembered perfectly well those demonic eyes, which resembled two fires and flushed red with anger. He remembered the burning touch of sharp tentacles. And he could not understand why all this turned into almost human eyes, careful hands and a peaceful disposition.

However, when he left the room, he found that there was no one nearby, and all he had to do was find his way out. If someone discovered the Sands, then there must be a dagger in the city that opened them. It is necessary to get him and stop the madness. It was this word that came to his mind, although he knew the true nature of the Sands. Vaguely, but still clear enough to realize that the Sands are the embodiment of intelligence. Dry, black, ruthless and destructive. A mind detached from bodies, from feelings and from life. Once Ajit was already fully convinced of this.

Walking down the corridor to the left and turning right at a fork, he was almost out of the palace, finding himself in a small garden bathed in moonlight. Ahead of him was another passage leading outside.

Suddenly, the ground trembled, and the walls began to tremble incessantly. A growing rumble rolled from somewhere, and Ajit stopped in surprise. A moment later, the hum was very close, and the walls surrounding it began to break, and broken pieces fell around Ajit. A second later, a huge whirlwind swept over him, throwing sand and small stones everywhere. Ajit tried to find what he thought was the safest place and froze. After a while, the vortex disappeared as quickly as it appeared.

After standing for a minute, waiting for the second whirlwind, Ajit walked through the gate he had seen earlier and looked around. To his left stood a tower, from the top of which a pillar of light was

oozing. Ajit knew instantly that the Watch must be there. Or maybe a dagger. But it is not easy to get there. On all sides the tower seemed impregnable, except for one bridge, which hung high above the ground and emerged from another tower, lower and standing a little farther away.

To reach it, Ajit will have to make his way through the buildings in front of him. No one knows what he might stumble upon in them.

And suddenly, reality finally pricked his heart. Asha - what's wrong with him? He must have died: only a miracle can survive in this madness. Ajit wanted to believe in miracles, but he was not so hot-headed, more reasonable and more realistic about things. He had already experienced the Sands once. And what was happening now only proved once again what he knew.

Meanwhile, unnoticed by himself, Ajit remembered this youthful ardor, sparkling eyes. He remembered Asha as his own son. Now their quarrel seemed to him so empty, so frivolous. He was even a little ashamed that he behaved like this, followed a random emotion and tried to convince Asha with such a stupid trick.

Asha continued to move towards the palace. Sand now and then got into his shoes, rubbing his feet heavily. Sand, sand, sand everywhere! Oh, how he hated him! And he would hate a thousand times more if he knew what exactly he was.

In his spare seconds, he pondered what had happened. After all, not every person is able to see souls after leaving their own body. It was not enough to say that it was incredible. It was simply impossible! But nevertheless, it happened.

As Asha pondered, he was also surprised at how many things he hadn't thought about before in his life. And now, when so many strange things had happened to him, it was as if he had become a different person. Or he became not quite a person, took a step aside.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of footsteps ahead. Instantly reacting to an extraneous sound, he saw two monsters in front of him, for some reason unarmed in their hands, slowly, without open hatred, approaching him. At first, he grabbed his sword, but after thinking for a moment, he put it back. He had better weapons.

Closing his eyes, Asha saw two white spots in front of him, and for some reason it seemed to him that they were tied with ropes. He hadn't seen everything so clearly last time. Now he felt and understood that he had to break these fetters by an effort of will and free the captive souls.

But everything did not happen as quickly as in his thoughts. At first, he felt as if he himself was slowly flowing out of his body. Then

he focuses on the ropes and begins to cut them. And suddenly something goes wrong behind him, something interferes with him, something holds him back. His own body does not let him go. But why? After another moment, he opened his eyes, already clearly aware that the ground beneath him was crumbling and disappearing from under his feet.

However, such an abrupt return was not in vain for him. His body could not take the shower abruptly, and Asha first bent over from the sharp pain, then felt a twinge of nausea and that his legs did not obey him. Trying to take a step to save himself, he collapsed to the ground, face down in the sand. The sand got into his mouth, stuck to his teeth, but the feeling of disgust that arose brought Asha back to consciousness. Clutching the loose sand with his fingers, he got up and ran, trying to spit the dirt out of his mouth.

Somewhere in the chaos of thoughts rushing through Asha's head, there was one that frightened him very much - the body would not just take the soul back. He did not believe that it was completely impossible, but the reflection of his gift turned out to be not so simple. Maybe he won't be able to revive Ajit at all.

Suddenly, for one happy second, he regained his composure. He turned around and ran as fast as he could, away from this place, feeling that even now the ground beneath him was ready to fall down and drag him with it. The monsters behind him turned into dust, which, swirling in the air, settled to the ground.

Suddenly, something pulled him abruptly. It would have taken him forever to realize that it was Ajit who had pulled him by the arm and was pulling him to him. Suddenly, for some reason, Asha remembered the dirt in his mouth again. But before he could do anything, he felt that his mouth was clamped with something and he could not even cough. Right now, the young man was in such a state that he couldn't realize that it was just Ajit's hand covering his mouth so that he wouldn't scream and give himself away. It seemed to Asha that the Sand was climbing inside him, that something was preventing him from getting rid of it. So many things in the last moments - it was too much for him, and he simply stopped resisting and went limp.

After a few minutes, Asha began to come to his senses, and from the fact that someone vigorously slapped him on the cheeks and shook him. At first, he had no idea who it could be, but after a minute, he clearly saw Ajit, with a smile on his face, alive and unharmed.

"Ajit!" I, I...," suddenly a pile of all his memories fell on Asha, with a simultaneous feeling that he had to tell all this to Ajit, which made him dizzy again, but this time not much, and everything was

limited to the fact that the surrounding reality barely noticeably shuddered.

-Get up. I'm glad you're alive. Now we need to find the dagger and put an end to it! Ajit said with barely concealed joy in his voice and at the same time with his usual patronizing expression.

"What dagger?" Asha asked, and then, confused, he exclaimed: "You have no idea what happened to me!

Ignoring the exclamation, Ajit replied:

"I think it's time to tell you something.

"About all this?" Asha asked carefully.

- Yes, and not only. Everything around is the Sand of Time!

Asha didn't think about how amazingly accurately Ajit pronounced these words. Now everything finally fell into place. Everything around is sand! The one and all-consuming thing that he was looking for. The same second force. That's why there is so much sand around! But what about his gift? It seemed that he had a completely different nature.

Ajit continued:

"The dagger I am talking about was brought by Maharaj from an island. Once, when I was as young as you are now, I went with him to the Isle in search of the extraordinary treasures of which the legend whispered by the vizier spoke. In addition to the dagger, we stole from the Island a huge hourglass, which the Maharaja hid in his treasury. He knew about the terrible power that was stored in it, and did not allow anyone to approach the Clock. Back on the Island, the vizier tried to take possession of the dagger several times, but he was lucky, and the Maharaja did not suspect anything. Amar has been hatching a plan ever since, and I am ready to give myself over to all these monsters if it is not his doing! The dagger is inserted into the Clock, which is like a prison for the Sands, and releases it.

Asha immediately wanted to ask about the locket, but in surprise, he was so uncontrollable that he could barely move his mouth.

"I know it all sounds crazy. But that's exactly how it is, and that's why we need to find the dagger and return the Sands inside the Clock," Ajit finished.

"And what kind of monster attacked us?" And how did you manage to survive? Asha asked.

"I don't know how. All I remember is that when I woke up, he was no longer around," Ajit replied.

Asha felt that Ajit was not saying something again, but he did not pester him, feeling that it was not too important, and Ajit had reason to remain silent.

Ajit was silent because the only thing he could not see an explanation for was his miraculous salvation. And this frightened him.

It was so frightening that I just wanted to get it out of my head, without saying any of my guesses aloud. He sighed, pointed to the tower and said:

"We need to get there, let's go."

They moved forward, and Asha began to tell what had happened to him. About the fact that he went through the barracks, about how several times he fell into some kind of emptiness, not feeling the ground under his feet. When he began to talk about how he traveled outside of his body and freed souls imprisoned in ugly bodies, he unexpectedly saw a smile on Ajit's face.

-Vide! Asha suddenly shouted in surprise and pointed forward with his hand.

The tower in front of them suddenly began to move downwards, as if falling into the ground. After a moment, both Asha and Ajit realized that they were the ones going up. A whole island has broken off from the ground and rises upwards.

Ajit, seeing the edge ahead, ran up to it and saw that only sand and debris of houses remained below. They were cut off from the tower - it remained far below. Their only chance is to somehow get to another island. He tried not to think about how unusual what was happening. A little farther away, several more sand islands soared into the air, along with the buildings on them. Huge streams of sand poured down from them like giant waterfalls. Everything seemed especially incredible because of the rising sun, which gave the sand a crimson hue.

Luck smiled on them, and the island with the tower also began to rise rapidly. The most surprising thing was that everything happened in absolute silence.

"This is our only chance. Forward!"

Ajit perfectly held the initiative in his hands. It is no coincidence that he was the head of security in the service of Magaradzhi. He did an excellent job in his position. He looked at things soberly and knew the moment at which to act. The only rule that he defined for himself a long time ago was that he did not believe in miracles and relied on luck only as a last resort.

Ajit grabbed Asha's arm, gestured to him to jump, took a step for a run, and jumped. And instantly he found himself on the other side. Turning around, he saw the island on which they had been standing being carried away.

Now it was difficult to figure out exactly where the earth was, where the sky was: everything was mixed up. The towers floating on the islands in the sky did not resemble the ordinary world to which their eyes were accustomed. Ajit had seen a lot on the island; Asha had also seen many miracles in his visions, but what they saw now was more exciting. What is the force that keeps these islands in the

air? Why did the earth, which had lost its usual appearance, become more beautiful and resemble some kind of fairy tale, a wonderful fantasy?

It seemed to Asha that he could watch for hours the mighty sand streams sliding down and being blown in different directions by the wind. He felt that the air was finally clearer, it became more pleasant for them to breathe, its freshness was slightly intoxicating. Probably, in the morning the air is always the most unusual, the best.

"We're very close. I don't know what lies ahead, but please be careful not to ask too many questions, especially if they are not in time. If everything ends successfully, then I promise to answer every one!

Ajit finished his sentence and wandered up the sandy slope, feeling his feet sink into it with every step. Asha turned and hurriedly walked after Ajit, feeling that he was still very happy to see him alive, despite his commanding tone.

Catching up with Ajit, Asha began to tell him about what had happened. After a while, he noticed that a smile was slipping across Ajit's face every now and then. He told about the strange cup, afraid to ask what it really was, about what happened when he put his hand into it.

Ajit listened in silence, but when Asha began to tell him about his hunches, that someone was accompanying them, and that he was thinking about his gift, Ajit suddenly... laughed, and very loudly:

"And did you decide to revive me?!"

Asha was very embarrassed, but still squeezed out an uncertain "yes".

"Don't you think it's too much?" Yes, a lot has happened during these days; Everything looks completely impossible, but to revive the dead... No, it's just crazy! Ajit said through laughter.

He himself did not understand why he was laughing so much. He knew that Asha's pride was very hurt, that he could lose his temper again and leave (although where could he go from the island in the sky?), but he continued to laugh. Although his eyes did not laugh for some reason.

"And what about the souls I have liberated?" And those two monsters that I met a few minutes before you? Did I make it all up? Asha spoke with undisguised resentment.

"These monsters cannot exist for long, they just disintegrate into grains of sand. In their place come others who are able to last longer. You could see just that. It even happens that the Sands try to create a semblance of people, endowing them with a soul. But at first, these bodies suffer and behave very strangely. They can no longer read our thoughts so easily, but they can easily hear and see. Your Gift," Ajit added an obvious smile to his voice at the last word, "is only that you

saw all this not with your own eyes, but in some other way. Maybe the Sands were trying to confuse you, because it's easier to get rid of you that way! "Ajit told me what he thought was really going on with Asha.

Suddenly, Asha remembered his random fear - what if he was wrong about being able to revive Ajit? About your gift in general? Now Ajit himself had aroused this fear in him, and along with this fear, this strange vision. Asha closed his eyes and realized that he had stopped seeing anything. No white threads, stains, showers. Ordinary, slightly reddish darkness. It was as if he had lost his eyes, not the ones he had used to look at Ajit, then into the distance, then under his feet, but some inner sight that revealed to him a mysterious world. And almost immediately this terrifying vision ceased to frighten him: he saw its meaning. He didn't even know whether to thank Ajit, who had given him this important thought, or to hold a grudge again. After all, he hurt the main thing - his faith.

Asha did not lose hope, even though it was now broken. He hoped that Ajit was wrong about something. He did not tell him about his vision and decided that he would not mention the one he called the Conduit again.

Finally, they reached the top of the slope. It remained to go around one tower, cross the bridge and climb another.

Silence reigned again. Asha fell silent, and Ajit stopped laughing. Both knew that this was not the best time to quarrel when they were so close to the goal. But their goal was to save the princess. Where is she? What's wrong with her?

Looking at each other by chance, they realized that they were thinking the same thing and did not remember the offenses at all.

"If she's alive, she's up there. I don't think the vizier loved her enough to keep her alive, but he won't miss the chance to show her all his greatness and power first," Ajit said thoughtfully.

-She's alive! Asha said, looking somewhere to the side.

"Didn't you think that your gift saved her too?" Ajit almost laughed again.

But Asha, unusually calm and, perhaps, even coldly, answered:

-No.

-A what? The Prince asked. -What does it mean?

He was used to understanding Faro, so he was surprised. If he saw Farah now, he would notice how she blushed.

"My mother told me when I was a child that this is a magic word," the girl answered. "She said: "If you can't find a way out, it will help. Just say it out loud!"

The prince grinned.

"Do you think it's funny?" Farah asked a little indignantly.

"To be honest, it's the stupidest thing I've ever heard in my life!"

The prince tried to make his voice soft, he did not want to offend Farah, but what she told him really amused him.

"Yes, maybe it's just silly children's fairy tales!" Farah replied and laughed too.

Suddenly, a metallic screech was heard somewhere nearby, and a door swung open a few steps away.

-What is this? Did you do something? The Prince asked.

There was no answer, but from Farah's surprised face he understood everything himself.

"What do you think is there?" Farah said these words without taking her eyes off the door.

"Where are we anyway?" What happened? I don't remember anything after I touched the cup.

"In some miraculous way, we were transported directly to the treasury, but the vizier appeared, released a whirlwind of sand, and I woke up here, next to you. Do you really remember anything at all?"

-Yes. Did I even try to seal the Clock?

"Yes, the vizier appeared at the very last moment, you had already begun to insert the dagger into the Clock, but something stopped him. It was as if some obstacle prevented the blade from entering all the way.

There was silence. The prince pondered what he had heard. Here it is! What the vizier was talking about. He can't do it on his own! He won't close the Clock. But the Prince did not remember anything that Farah had said. She couldn't have lied to him, could she? So he really didn't remember anything.

A pleasant sweet aroma came from somewhere. The prince and Farah went to the door at the same time, and found themselves in a small corridor, at the end of which there was a round staircase leading down. Unexpectedly for the Prince, Farah turned around, stood facing him, ran her hand over his left arm, smiled and ran.

The prince did not immediately understand what had happened. He stopped and stared at Farah as she ran away for a few seconds. Then he realized that she was just having fun, playing with him, and an almost identical smile appeared on his face. He ran after her.

The staircase turned out to be very long, and the Prince did not understand how anyone had ever thought of building it. But he heard Farah's ringing laughter and her quick steps in front of him, and he continued to descend without hesitation.

"It's so beautiful here!" Hurry up here! Farah's voice suddenly rang out, full of undisguised admiration. She spoke softly, but there was such silence that the Prince could clearly make out what she was

saying. When he finally ran the last steps, the Prince understood where this admiration came from. He found himself in a small hall, lit by a dozen candles, from which this most pleasant aroma emanated. In the center of the hall there was a small pool. The water in it reflected the flames of the candles and scattered hundreds of glare on the walls.

The headlight was already in the water. She looked at the Prince, moved her legs and arms to stay afloat, and smiled.

Her radiant smile was the best reward for the Prince now. Oh, if only he could keep it forever! He wanted it so badly and did not suspect it, that in his heart he remembered her forever exactly as she was now: sparkling, cheerful and infinitely sweet. One for which it cost him nothing to go through any trial. To be in the icy water again, to deal with a hundred more monsters - anything, just to see her for a second more.

The prince takes off his belt with a sword and dagger, pulls off his torn and blood-stained shirt and, closing his eyes, dives into the water. He is surprised to feel that she has some special taste. Sweet like a dream. He knew that when he surfaced and opened his eyes, he would be next to Farah. The prince wished for it, although they were separated for only a few minutes. He knew that nothing would stop them now.

Emerging from the water, the Prince took a deep breath and opened his eyes. Headlight, here it is in front of him. He reaches out his hand and touches it. He looks into her eyes, in which the glare from the water also plays. He sees that the thin strand of hair that hid Farah's last secret has stuck to the side of her face and now it does not prevent him from touching this mystery. And time freezes. Even if only for moments, they seem like an eternity for these two, in which they can hide from all adversity, dividing each breath in half. There are no palace vaults, no tears, no pain and horror, no Sands, no vizier, there are only them and the insanely sweet air, which drives away the harsh reality even more strongly. There is nothing but them. They are the Universe. Two lovers deserve it. Because they found each other in this universe.

The prince felt the heat overcome him when Farah's face was very close to him. And now it is even closer. Again and again. And a timid kiss burns his lips. Thin. Infinitely tender. With the taste of dreams. He felt dizzy at once, it seemed to him that his whole body was being pricked by a thousand needles, it ceased to obey him, and he could hardly move even his arm, which made his movements stiff and clumsy; For a second, it even seemed to him that the ground was shaking.

But he already knew that this was the best thing he had experienced in his life. In Farah's eyes, he saw exactly the same feelings that burned in himself.

He closed his eyes, took a sharp breath, and immediately opened them.

The prince was lying on the bare floor among some ruins. There was no headlight nearby. And the dagger disappeared. Not understanding what had happened, the Prince slowly exhaled and got to his feet. Farah couldn't have been pretending all this time, could she?

"What was it? Dream? But why is it so real, why does it remember every bit of it? And could it be that Farah also had this dream?" the Prince asked himself.

Chapter 22. Honor and glory

"Princess, don't be afraid of us!" Asha suddenly shouted.

Ajit was completely unaware of what was happening, but he turned to where Asha was looking. Not far away, he saw a young girl in a red dress, with black hair and expressive, beautiful eyes. A long time ago, when she saw them, she slowed down.

Asha and Ajit went to meet her.

"Don't come near me, you—" Farah drew her dagger and pointed it at the strangers.

"We're not monsters, don't be afraid!" We serve your father faithfully, Princess; We will save you! - Asha said again.

"It's true, we're from Kashi, from the palace guard," Ajit added.

-That's impossible! Did this vile vizier send you? What does he want? I will not give him the dagger, nor will I surrender to the last drop of blood! Farah's words sounded more brave than they really were. She was just desperate. After what happened to the Prince, after he almost killed her... She couldn't just believe the two strangers.

The decision to leave the Prince was hard for her. She cursed herself for having made up her mind. What if he was in danger now? What if he died because of her? She did not want to live because of these thoughts, she did not want to change anything. But she still went forward. She was led by the hope that everything would end, that the Prince would remain alive and she would be able to see him again. But why did he try to kill her? What did Peski do to him? Had he become one of the monsters? Or is it about to be?

The appearance of Asha and Ajit distracted Farah from her heavy thoughts, although it did not bring much joy. She could not believe that there were people in front of her, and from her hometown.

"Princess, we're not going to take the dagger away from you!" We are not going to kill you! We have sworn to protect you! Ajit went on. "I traveled with your father to the Island of Time.

Headlight opened her eyes a little wider. Her father told her about the Island. From him, she knew a little about the Sands.

"But how? Is this stranger telling the truth?" thought Farah.

Seeing the change of mood in Farah's hostile face, Ajit became a little bolder and began to tell further:

"Together with him and a few others, including the vizier, we brought the Clock, the dagger, and—" See the locket around your neck?

Farah looked at the locket, even though she knew it was on her. After Ajit's words, she must have been expecting something unusual.

"He's from there, too. But it is not real. I found another medallion on the Island, truly ancient and connected to the Sands more deeply.

These words of Ajita were watched in surprise not only by Farah, but also by Asha. Now he has received an answer to another of his questions. And then he had a new one - why didn't he guess where Ajit got the locket from? After all, he had already heard about the Island.

It's now or never, Ajit decided.

He walked over to Farah, stretched out his hand, and touched the locket, saying:

"Look, I'll prove it's real." It will destroy the fake one with a simple touch.

The locket disappeared before our eyes. The headlight touched the chain - there really was no medallion.

"I am telling the truth, princess. We'll help you stop the vizier if it's not too late. It's a pity, I knew that all this would happen one day," Ajit continued to convince the princess.

"But if you knew, why didn't you warn anyone and stop him?" Farah asked, surprised, but already with some confidence.

"I didn't have any evidence. Only guesses and what I saw on the Island," Ajit explained. "Though your father trusted me, he would not tolerate such baseless statements against his vizier.

"What did you see on the Island?"

"The vizier almost let Peski go when we were there, trying to get his hands on the dagger. But Maharaja intervened in time - he already knew what it could lead to. Finally, Amar stole a book from the Island that he found in the Island's book hall. But then he did not show himself in any way, did not give the slightest reason for suspicion. Everything was forgotten, and I let my guard down.

Farah was surprised again, though there was a hint of indifference on her face. Not to Ajit and their conversation, but to everything. However, she replied:

"I know what you're talking about. I saw this book, the vizier accidentally dropped it and did not notice it. But it remained with the Prince.

-Who is this? Ajit asked. Asha stood beside him and looked at Farah intently.

"He is the Prince of Persia. It was he who attacked our city that night with his father's army. And almost the only one of those who survived and helped me survive. I love him, but—" Farah dropped one tear, winced, trying to hold back the others, but stopped, feeling a lump in her throat that prevented her from speaking.

Asha and Ajit were stunned. She says this about who caused all this to happen?

There was silence. Everyone was thinking about something. Asha was the first to say something, but Ajit stopped his attempt with a gesture, already knowing what he wanted to say. Ajit realized that despite everything, Farah had already made her choice. And nothing can be changed. Asha was silent.

"But something happened, right?" Ajit continued to ask. It was pointless to persuade her to go now. The princess should have calmed down, and the best way for her to do it now was to tell strangers all about what had happened:

"We've reached the top of this tower. And so, when the goal was already very close, for some reason he dipped his hands into a strange bowl, and terrible things began to happen to him: he screamed into the void, then bent in half from pain. And then he took out his sword... and tried to kill me. I ran back, and suddenly he lost consciousness. I can't forgive myself for leaving. She took the dagger and threw it there. But we need to get rid of the Sands! Only I don't understand - what happened to him?"

Farah stopped again, and silence reigned. Asha and Ajit were expectantly silent.

"He often talked about a dream he didn't remember, but he wanted to see," Farah said at last.

"The sands give many visions. But they are all false. It looks like they've defeated him and—" Ajit began, but when he saw the tears welling up in the princess's eyes again, he didn't finish and only added slowly to distract attention, "Let's go." We need to end this!

Asha was silent all this time. He had a question that was important and really serious, but he didn't ask it to Ajit. He pondered it himself. He was interested in what would happen next - a question that every person probably thinks about in his life, and more than once. What will happen when they close this Clock? Will everything return to its place? But how? Will the Earth become one again, the monsters will disappear, and the dead will come to life? He could hardly believe that such events, many times larger than those that had already happened, could suddenly happen. What then? Again the unknown, again the fear of it? Or will he finally be able to see his mysterious savior?

In spite of everything, it was better to accept the unknown. Compared to inevitability, it offers at least one chance in a million, a faint hope. Asha has always chosen hope. In the most difficult moments, she led him, supported him and gave him support, even if no one supported the hope itself, and there was no support under it. But what will happen to him if you take away hope from him?

They had to cross the bridge and climb to the top of the Tower of Dawn, to the treasury.

Farah didn't try to find out how Ajit had guessed that they had to move there. She did not notice what was happening above the tower. There was only one thing on her face - fatigue.

The silence and reverie were suddenly broken by the nasty cry of birds. It seemed familiar to Ajit, though he didn't remember anyone who could make such a sound. Asha, who was thoughtfully wandering behind them in the distance, stopped in surprise.

"Hurry, run here!" Ajit shouted to him. "We'll hide in the tower."

Taking a step, Asha felt a familiar but impossibly hateful and untimely sensation – the ground was slipping from under his feet. The bridge beneath him was collapsing.

Asha did not pay attention to how, in addition to the bird, the silence was broken by loud laughter, angry, reverberating echoing around. Ajit and Farah, to their regret, recognized the vizier's voice.

"Show yourself!" Ajit couldn't stand it anymore and screamed.

But nothing changed, and the laughter continued.

Asha tried to jump on a large fragment in front of him, which still seemed reliable. From it he wanted to jump to the other side of the bridge. But the stone block turned out to be completely unreliable. And at the moment when everything was already hopeless and Ajit closed his eyes in pain, not wanting to believe what was happening, Asha saw that the bird was flying under the bridge. This was his only chance for salvation. He jumped and hit the huge black bird on its back, immediately wrapping around its mighty neck. Of course, she did not like the uninvited rider, and she began to wriggle in the air, trying in every possible way to throw Asha off. He clung tighter to his neck, deciding that he would fall down only with the bird. And suddenly a daring thought came to him. Out of habit, he closed his eyes. But he was disappointed - he did not see anything. The second time nothing happened. Maybe Ajit was right? Is all this his fiction and false visions?

But when he opened his eyes, he realized that he was mistaken. He saw the world not with his own eyes, but with the eyes of the bird on which he was sitting. He was in her body, he could feel the power in the giant wings. And the most incredible feeling was that he continued to feel how he was sitting... on your neck! Or not at his own, but at the bird he was now. It was hard to think, but he liked one of the thoughts more than the others. He felt that the bird and himself were now one.

He flapped his wings.

Oh, how beautiful! It soars, it can fly! How magnificent! Every second gave him incredible sensations, delight, joy. He flew around the tower, soared up, seeing the edge of the rising sun. Then he rushed down like an arrow and began to rise up again at the very ground. Despite his joy, he understood that this could not go on

forever. He climbed over the bridge, hung in place, choosing a place to sit in. That's amazing! No man had ever experienced such a thing before. I didn't have to think about flapping my wings more slowly before landing.

Suddenly, Asha felt a sharp pain in his chest and heard:

-Get!

It was Farah - she shot an arrow from her bow and hit Asha directly. Or rather, she shot and hit the bird, but only because she did not know what really happened. In a moment, he was in his own body, although the feeling that he had wings refused to leave him immediately. Jumping off the disappearing bird (Asha wouldn't dare call it a monster now), he ran up to Farah and Ajit. In his eyes, instead of the fright they expected, there was joy.

- Since when did the imminent death begin to make you happy? Ajit asked.

"I'm not happy about her. And not to his own salvation. And the fact that we are one step away from the goal, the princess is with us and..." Asha poured out his joy in words, but he did not want to tell Ajit the truth. He saw a rift between them, growing with every word Ajit said in disbelief. He did not want to go beyond the boundaries of his knowledge. And Asha knew that there was something else besides the Sands.

"So what?" - he waited for the continuation.

"And there is no time to delay!" - Asha finished, thinking about the fact that he had to say and hear this phrase more than ten times, which made him pretty tired of it.

By this moment, the vizier's laughter had subsided, and the pre-dawn silence enveloped everything again. But the fact that it rang out warned them that something was waiting for them ahead.

-Headlight! - sounded somewhere in the distance, barely distinguishable.

Farah inhaled and closed her eyes. She knew she didn't think so. It is the Prince calling her. But gritting her teeth, she took a step away and was the first to enter the tower.

The prince called again, but saw that the small red spot had disappeared from view. Lost, lost... He could no longer find a place, although the hope that he could catch up with her, that he could fix something, was alive. He noticed that he had almost lost his sense of fear. He stood on the edge, half a step from the abyss, and was not afraid. He was not afraid to die, he was not afraid to kill. He was only afraid of not having time.

"No...", whispered the Prince. He did not want to believe in what had happened. What he feared most happened – they were separated. The prince thought about how wonderful it would be if people could fly. Then there would be much fewer barriers between them.

Many times, Farah looked at the Tower of Dawn, marveling at its majesty and beauty. She, like a sentry, towered over the whole city. And by the will of fate, it turned out to be the abode of the Sands, which brought chaos and destruction to these places.

She was afraid that the same thing would happen to her heart. That in one unfortunate moment everything could be cut short, and there would be no way back, there would be no need to try and nothing to hope for. Everything will crumble into hundreds of lifeless fragments, which will be impossible to put together again. And now, when she was beginning to think that the moment had come, she met Asha and Ajit. Two saviors who, having sworn allegiance to Maharaja, protected his daughter.

The prince also thought a lot. He looked at their single goal and at the many roads leading in it. Like threads, they entangled the tower. All roads led to the tower in one way or another. Why does this happen? Whichever way you go, you get to a certain place, whether you want it or not. The whole fate is built from such points that cannot be bypassed. This has happened before - Pisky. He would have revealed them in one way or another, in whatever way it happened. And Farah... He could have met her under completely different circumstances. But the Prince suddenly did not want to believe in such predetermination. Is it possible that nothing is under his control? What if, he shuddered at the thought, he hadn't met Faro? What if all this is just an accident, and he sees it as inevitable?

And now the Prince felt that without her his thoughts flowed somehow strangely, drawing him into the abyss of thoughts, where reason reigned, not knowing how to feel, to enjoy life, but only building endless reasoning, guesses and killing the light in the soul. A person is happy as long as he lives and does not think too much about how he lives.

Suddenly, his recent thoughts came back to him, but now they gave him even more hope. If Farah is inevitable, then he will definitely find another way. He felt that the thinnest thread between them was preserved. It will not be enough to get to the other side, but it will be enough for hope. And there is enough hope to do the

impossible. The prince had to go downstairs, but some unknown force almost destroyed the tower, causing all the exits to be blocked. The only way is the outer wall.

He jumped onto a wooden beam sticking out of the wall just below. Fast and accurate. Seeing a row of beams nearby, he stood up and jumped onto the next one. Then he moved to the third. The rest were more crowded, and the Prince just ran along them. He didn't care that everything around him had taken on such an outlandish shape - islands in the air instead of the already familiar, albeit hateful city. Hanging on his hands, he wrapped his legs around the pillar and climbed onto it. There was no further road. At all. Unless...

The prince jumped down. Having flown almost an entire floor, he abruptly threw his arms and legs to the sides and tried to stop the fall, resting against the walls. And he succeeded, but from the pain that hit his joints, he almost fell off, and his face was distorted into a terrible grimace.

Now it remained to go down, still resting on the stone. Almost at the very ground a thick chain stretched down. The prince clung to it and, quickly moving his arms and legs, soon found himself on the ground.

"Are you in a hurry?" The prince heard a familiar voice behind him.

He turned and saw Essen. His mind refused to believe what his eyes saw. Is Essen alive? How?

"Are you in a hurry to die?" Well, I'll help! Essen said.

-A what? Why? The Prince had time to ask before Essen pounced on him, trying to kill him with his sword.

The prince immediately noticed that Essen was not like himself in battle. He behaved confidently, assertively, was agile and fast. The prince kept putting his sword in front of his face, protecting himself from the blows. And Essen used his own techniques. The prince seriously began to think that he was fighting with himself. But he did not want to fight Essen at all. He defended himself. And waited. I waited for at least something to become clear.

"You started all this!" You're going to die! But not for starting. But for not finishing. The dagger is now in the hands of the enemy! Did you think Farah was your friend? She was just waiting for the moment to steal the dagger! What if she was in league with the vizier? You had a chance in your hands, but you missed it and you can't fix it! I warned you not to be seen by me!

Having said that, Essen rushed at the Prince, raising his sword above his head, but the Prince already knew that he would strike with it sharply from below, and now he was just a distraction, and prepared to parry the blow. But Essen hit the Prince at a run, and he

fell on his back. Another second, and he could be killed. It's hard to fight with yourself.

Suddenly, a noise was heard behind Essen, and the Prince saw Dahaka approaching them. Essen turned around – he clearly did not expect this, although at first the Prince thought that this was the death that the vizier had prepared for him, as he had promised.

Taking advantage of the moment, the Prince jumped up from the ground and ran to the side. And he knew he wouldn't even need a dagger.

The prince cast a glance at Dahaka. He watched him closely, preparing to attack. Essen muttered something unintelligible, trying to stay on his feet. It was clear from him that he was seized with weakness for some unknown reason. He could hardly stand. His weakness was like that of a dying man. Dahaka suddenly roared loudly and threw out huge tentacles from behind him, pointing them directly at the Prince. But he jumped to the side, so that the beast hit Essen. Instantly, a flash of bright white light struck, and the Prince did not see what was happening where Essen and Dahaka had just been.

However, now the path in front of the Prince was clear. From the top, he saw that one of the bridges was destroyed, and ran along the next one. Stopping at the entrance, he took one last look back. There was nothing and no one behind.

As he ran into the tower, he heard the sound of blades in the air. His heart clenched and he rushed up.

He tried to drive away thoughts of Essen, but he did not succeed completely. What had just happened was too strange.

Trying to shake off the flow of thoughts, the Prince shouted:
-Headlight!

It seemed to him that he wanted to shout that name a hundred times. Hearing her fighting monsters somewhere above, he couldn't be calm. His body shivered, and he cursed himself for not being able to run faster.

When Asha, Ajit, and Farah went inside the tower, each of them felt that they didn't want to say another word. A fettering horror hovered here. And this time he had a very real image. In front of them in the center of the hall stood a huge monster. Or rather, for Farah it was just a monster. For Asha and Ajit, it was the mysterious Dahaka.

"Your locket!" It glows again! Asha whispered.

Dahaka strode in the direction of Ajit. Then he stretched out his hand and turned his attention to the locket.

"He only wants your locket!" Asha said a little louder. "Give it back!"

It was clear from Ajit's face that he did not want to do this. Indeed, it was foolish to deprive oneself of the last weapon.

"Give him what he wants!" We can't handle it! Farah echoed Asha's words.

Ajit took the locket in his hand and tilted his head. In those brief seconds, he pondered. He thought about what Asha had told him about his strange visions. About how much they are unlike those that the Sands can give. And how dangerous it is to trust them.

"I hope you're right!" Ajit said suddenly, and pulling the locket from his neck, he threw it in front of Dahaka.

Asha understood what Ajit meant. His heart even rejoiced because he believed him. It turns out that he was pretending? Or was he trying to be in charge? Or did he not want to entrust his life to something invisible just like that? One way or another, Asha felt his sharply increased responsibility.

The locket melted in moments from the beast's touch, just like the one around Farah's neck until Ajit touched it.

Dahaka then walked past Ajit and suddenly disappeared.

Without saying a word, the three of them ran upstairs up a huge spiral staircase hidden in the wall. The tower consisted of many tiers, in the center of each of which, on the floor, there was a huge hole, so from the very bottom you could see the last tier.

The staircase by which they climbed now and then led them past balconies and halls. When it was over, they ran out onto one of the balconies, which was also round, and began to look for a way further.

A separate staircase led to the treasury, resting on a large door. The door, by an incredibly happy coincidence, was open. But suddenly...

As he went upstairs, the Prince thought about what had happened. With wild excitement, he rushed into his first battle, wanting to show his father his courage, dexterity, valor, and loyalty. To earn glory for yourself and him. Single-handedly deal with many enemies. He succeeded, but instead of Indian soldiers, they turned out to be monstrous sand creatures and his own father, who turned into one of them. He saw how one man could destroy the whole world. It is easy to turn it from an ordinary world into hell. Now he had one last chance in his hands - he had to punish the vizier. With this, perhaps, he will somehow paint over the stain that fell on his soul. And what the hell has happened now? How did Essen come to

life and why did he attack? And why did Dahaka give him the opportunity to leave?

Pops began to be heard everywhere and monsters began to appear right out of thin air. Farah screamed in surprise and resentment.

"Hurry, to the treasury!" Ajit shouted, grabbing Farah by the arm. She felt that everything around her was about to lose its shape. She has forgotten that she has a dagger, she is one step away from the Clock and can put an end to the nightmare.

The hall in which the Clock stood turned out to be higher than the previous one, but this time. Gold coins, jewelry, and precious stones were scattered everywhere. But none of this compared to the main value for all three of them - their lives, which were under threat. The monsters filled the treasury in an instant, cutting off the path to the Clock. The only way to escape was another staircase leading somewhere up. They would have to fight, everyone knew that. But up there, they had a better chance - a huge hole was broken in the ceiling. Perhaps it was formed due to a ray of light that until recently emanated from the Clock.

The prince ran to the door to the treasury and went inside. Pulling the handle, he felt a golden mist begin to envelop him. For a moment, he felt something inexplicably strange. It seemed to him that he was now closer than ever to the truth. But to what truth? Where is she? Silence reigned around. In the center of the hall was a huge hourglass. The prince remembered them well - they had not changed in the slightest. Only he has changed. Suddenly, he heard the clashing of blades somewhere above and ran up the stairs.

Farah put an arrow into her bow and shot at the monster that was chaining over his head. It instantly fell and turned into dust. This was the case with the second and the third, but there were more and more monsters. And then they came up to each other, something happened, and instead of them there appeared one big monster one and a half times the height of a man. It was also surprising that at the same time their weapons also became larger. As if they and their swords were made of the same entity.

Ajit and Asha fought desperately against their enemies, but what could they do? Without the locket, their weapons were nothing to these creatures.

"Well, where is he?!" Where is your savior?! I entrusted you and him with our lives! There is none! Hear?! There is none! Ajit shouted rudely in the face of his friend Ashe. "It's a deception!"

Ajit didn't want to be rude to Asha at all. All his ridicule and remarks are just carefully concealed despair. And in an impulse he could say many terrible words to the person closest to him now. It was hard not to experience what was going on inside of Ajit, considering that the worst of nightmares had returned to his life, which he had hoped to never hear again, let alone relive again.

Something burst inside Asha. It staggered, cracked and collapsed. The flame of the candle that nourished his soul went out. Is everything he saw a deception? Was Ajit right when he laughed at him? Are all these stupid visions nothing? Were hopes empty? And the whole life? When he closed his eyes, he saw only a dark spot that could hardly help him. Asha's eyes darkened. He did not lose consciousness. He died. His skin instantly lost its color, and his body began to crumble into pieces. Deprived of his invented gift and non-existent savior, he became defenseless. It was as if the reflection from the bowl had captured him and made him a sand monster. The sand swallowed him.

Ajit hadn't noticed how much he had become attached to this young man in recent days. He treated him as his own son, he loved him almost like a father. And even more - he depended on Asha. Seeing the young man die, Ajit felt a sharp pain in his heart. And he realized that he could not live on without the hope that shone in his friend's eyes, without himself. He fell to his knees and said goodbye to life. With a life in which there is nothing left. Ajit only saw the princess, surrounded by monsters, trying to escape and make her way to the exit. But it is unlikely that she will succeed. All their attempts were doomed to failure from the beginning. He wanted to apologize to the Maharaja for not being able to fully protect his daughter. A moment later, Ajit felt his flesh pierce through a sharp sword. He felt the taste of his own blood. He felt the emptiness of the world he was leaving and fell dead. The last thing he felt was a sharp thirst. His lips hadn't touched moisture for so long.

Dahaka confused all his plans. Again. And the fight in Essen's body at the same time with the Prince and with Dahaka almost deprived him of his strength. And there were already few of them after he saved the Prince from the power contained in the cup. He couldn't get to the top quickly, the towers, and all he had to do was

watch Asha, and then Ajit, die. He stood aside as an indifferent observer. He didn't care much about what he looked like, but if Asha had had time to look at him before he died, he wouldn't have seen the usual silvery-white spot anymore. His true appearance was more like a living dead. Almost on a decayed corpse. A strange black spot. And he himself was very weak. Only his eyes retained their white color.

Now he saw the Prince running into the upper hall, trying to save Farah. Everything is on schedule. Time is an enemy that it has not been able to defeat. He even thought that fate did exist. And that if something was going to happen, it would happen. His plan turned out to be a failure. And now that Asha is dead, he has once again become completely invisible to humans.

"Well, all I can do is watch," thought the Ghost.

And Jatta down there would be able to hold Dahaka back for a while. A few minutes will be enough.

The prince, running upstairs, saw Farah, desperately swinging a dagger at the monsters. She was one step away from falling. Suddenly, one of the monsters swung its sword sharply, and Farah recoiled and fell, barely catching her hands on the edge.

"Headlight, no!" The Prince shouted.

The prince held his sword above his head across the monster's blow, which was intended for Farah. Pushing the monster towards the others, he rushed into the pile of enemies, brandishing his weapon. Dodging the blow, the Prince ripped open the chest of the first. Forcefully pushing the second one away and clearing the passage, he ran to the edge of the rift, hitting the legs of another monster as he went. The Prince did not even notice the two dead soldiers nearby, his thoughts were occupied with only one.

Farah held on to the stone edge with the last of her strength. The prince hung down and tried to grab her arm. He felt the pleasant warmth of her hands again. It seemed that this warmth was transferred even to the dagger. But from fear, excitement, and tension, the Prince's hands were damp, and his palm slipped onto the blade of the dagger. Blood flowed, but he wasn't going to let it go. Farah could no longer hold on - the other hand slipped, and her life was in the hands of the Prince. Or rather, even in one. A drop of blood fell on her face, slid over it, and hovered on her chin. Another moment, and it will fall.

The prince gritted his teeth and, overcoming the pain, tried to drag Farah back.

"Everything will be fine," he whispered. "I'll get you out!"

The prince had completely forgotten about the monsters around him. They weren't going to wait for him to pull Farah out. Seeing the sword raised over the Prince, she closed her eyes and whispered:

"Kakkolukkia!"

"It wasn't a dream!" - flashed through the Prince's head.

After that, she let go of the hilt of the dagger and flew down. After a few infinitely long moments for the Prince, the sound of flying coins was heard. In those moments, the Prince caught the last drops of life in his bottomless, beloved black eyes. He understood why Farah had sacrificed herself. He grabbed the dagger, but it did not succumb to the Prince's attempts to go back a few seconds at all.

"Only a few seconds, it used to work!" he thought.

But the dagger was silent. As if it had completely lost its power. Seconds were running out, and the Prince could not help it. Dagger magic didn't work. When it was needed most. The dagger only gave off an unusual warmth instead of the usual cold. The warmth reminded him of Farah's touch.

He felt a bitterness in his throat, and he wanted to scream. And turning over on his back and dodging the blow of the sword, he screamed. With a scream, he plunged the dagger into the bodies of the monsters, leaping like lightning from one to the other before they even had time to turn to dust. There were no individual enemies in front of his eyes. There were no walls, sky and floor. Everything around him was one single enemy. He only knew where to strike in order to deal with him as quickly as possible.

In a minute, there was nothing left around. The Prince's gaze brightened, and he walked to the edge of the tower and looked into the distance. A new day was being born in the east. And his life had just ended. Without Farah, it couldn't be life.

The prince fought bravely and courageously, he won even in such an unequal battle. But even if he fights until the desert sands turn red with blood, he will not be able to revive the dead. The time has come to seriously think about what he wanted before and desires now, what his own and other people's lives mean to him, whether he knows how to love, whether he needs honor and glory? Does he need them now? Now that he had won, but was left alone with his victory in the middle of the realm of emptiness. Who is his victory for? And who will praise him for her? Now he wished that no one knew about her at all. It's a pity that any wisdom comes at a huge price. Only after going through pain and loss did the Prince learn true values.

But no matter what, he was going to finish with the Sands. Right away.

Nothing had changed in the hall in which the Clock stood. The same silence: there was no one in the hall. The sand was still dissipating in different directions like fog. The rising sun shone brightly through the tall long windows.

But nothing else occupied the Prince's mind: he saw Farah. It lay among a scattering of gold coins not far from the Clock. It seemed that there was still life in her body. But, alas, life left her. The prince knelt down and sobbed in a frenzy. He could not come to terms with Farah's death, although he knew that he could not bring her back. She died, died, like many people dear to the Prince.

-No! No," he repeated in a hoarse voice, choked with sobs. - Why?! For what?! No... No...

The silent and invisible Ghost watched him from somewhere above.

The only thing the Prince wanted now was to kill the vizier (oh, how he wished for his death!). Kill the Vizier and seal the Clock. He wanted to see Amar that minute.

"After all, it is he who is to blame for all the troubles! - flashed through the Prince's head. "He will pay dearly for everything!"

And then, as if someone had heard the Prince's wish, the vizier appeared. Hearing footsteps, the Prince raised his head. The Prince's eyes were filled with ebullient anger, blackened. He looked like an angry bull. The hand clutching the dagger shook at this savage hatred, and the Prince dropped it. But the Prince did not hesitate. Another second and he rushed at the vizier and knocked him to the ground. The only thing that saved the vizier from instant death was that he was holding his staff in his hands, otherwise the Prince would have simply torn him to pieces. But the vizier only managed to put out his staff and take it in both hands before the Prince, running into him, grabbed the same staff and tried to strangle the hated enemy with it.

The fallen vizier in a vile, strangled voice, realizing that he could not cope with the Prince, desperately tried to mislead him:

"Give me the dagger!" And I will give you eternal life, it will be yours!

"How did he manage to survive?" thought the vizier.

Now he hoped that his last plan would work. He was weak. The sands refused to obey him, and the protective sphere literally exploded, finally stripping him of power. Now their power was free, uncontrollable. She lifted entire islands into the sky and mercilessly beat those who stood in her way. Therefore, the vizier could only anger the Prince, distract him so that he plunged a dagger into him. Not a sword, but a dagger. If the vizier had more strength now, he would appear before the Prince in the form of a sand monster, against which the dagger is the only weapon. The vizier regretted

that he did not have the necessary knowledge earlier, when he still had enough strength!

But the Prince, bewildered by the vizier's last words, jumped aside, picked up his dagger from the floor, and paused for a moment in thought.

-Dagger? Eternal life... And those whom I loved, who were dear to me, will be dead? According to you... along... my fault?

The Prince's voice cracked. It was as if a wave of icy water washed over him in the next second. And so, in an instant, simple words finally made everything very clear. His eyes, still spraying with the same wild fury, regained their former color and opened wider than usual. The human principle won in him, at least for the moment. And the vizier's last plan failed. The only thing the Prince said was:

"I can fix it!"

Another moment, and the Prince rushed to the Clock: he literally ran up the smooth marble column and, jumping away from it, found himself on the very top of the Clock. "Not a second of delay! No more mistakes!" - thoughts swarmed in the Prince's head. And he plunged his dagger into the hole on the top of the Clock, from which a soft bluish light emanated. This decision was born somehow, intuitively, no one told him what to do. And he had nothing to lose. The last thing the Prince heard were the vizier's words, or rather the cry:

"Left..."

A second, an instant, and everything around was gone: no Clock, no Vizier, no Farah.

The prince woke up in the camp. His hand was still clutching the dagger. A faint bluish glow was still emanating from it. On the thick blue fabric of the tent, the silhouettes of two guards were clearly visible. As before, rain fell from the sky in large rare drops. Then, unexpectedly, one of the drops seeped through the top of the tent and hit the Prince's eye. Still tense, the Prince involuntarily shuddered and, looking around and making sure that everything was as before, began to carefully and quietly make his way to the exit. Why did it happen this way? Was that what he wanted? Did Farah want this?

When the Prince stepped outside, he found that one of the guards was asleep, leaning on a halberd, while the other was standing with his back to the Prince, cowering from the cool rain, muttering something. Taking advantage of this, the Prince got out of the camp unnoticed and headed into the thick of the rainforest.

At first, it seemed to the Prince that the forest was asleep, and only the rain, knocking loudly on the leaves, disturbed his tranquility. But the forest lived. It was full of sounds, faintly audible from the sound of the rain. In the distance, a dull growl could be heard, from time to time flocks of small long-tailed birds flew past the Prince. The

forest, rustling its leaves under the blows of raindrops, seemed like a large, powerful, living creature.

The prince turned around: the torches of the camp he had recently left were visible nearby.

-Camp... War... Father..." the Prince moved his lips faintly. -He's alive! Hurry up to him. I haven't seen him for so long!

The prince rushed headlong towards the camp.

The Prince's eyes burned with bright lights, they were full of joy. As if someone up there saw the Prince, his suffering, and decided to give him a second chance. It seemed that everything had returned to its previous track. But then the Prince, blinded by joy and running, not looking around or at his feet, stretched out to his full height on the ground - he did not notice the snag sticking out of the muddy forest soil washed away by the rain.

Annoyed, the Prince got up from the ground and tried to look around him. But in the darkness of the night and even being in the forest, he did not see anything. Only when the lightning flashed in the sky for a brief moment did the Prince see his dirty knees and hands. Rubbing one against the other, he moved on.

But he did not go long.

"I will go to my father, and the vizier will betray his Maharaja again! And everything will repeat itself! And I will lose everything again...", the cruel truth visited the Prince's head. "To the palace! To Farah! Kill the traitor! I want to see her. I'll make it before morning!" Yes! She will believe me!"

Now the Prince understood why time had returned to this point. Or, at least, it made some sense. At this point, the Prince's thoughts simply ended, he ran, determined to punish the enemy, to return what he had taken from him.

For a split second, the entire forest was lit up by a flash of lightning. Another second, and the peals of thunder began to be heard. They frightened one of the forest dwellers, there was a crack of a branch, someone's hooting, and then another flash, and another peal, and another, and another.

But the Prince did not notice this, for a few more seconds he stood indecisive, just doing nothing, and then rushed from the place to where the palace was. He did not know what was leading him, he had never been here, and the forest made it difficult to see anything, and even flashes of lightning did not change anything, but he knew where to run, and he just ran, it seemed to him all the time that it was too slow, but not every runner was able to overtake him; He crossed one of the ditches as if it were a small hole, although from the outside this jump seemed simply impossible. It was the urge to do the impossible that drove him now, and he ran on, ignoring the fatigue, the pain in his knee, and the slippery ground. Everything

could be seen in his eyes now: flashes of lightning, sparks of anger and joy, and flames of love.

A light flickered ahead. "Yes! It's a palace!" – I can't even say that I thought, but just understood. And suddenly a strange feeling: had he been here before? A second of hesitation, a flash of lightning, and the sounds of his running were no longer audible to the next peals of thunder.

And then the Prince realized that he was even closer to the palace than he thought. It was not clear why, but he climbed up without hesitation. There was simply not enough room in his head to think about a mistake, that something could go wrong.

Another flash, and he's on the balcony. Soft light illuminated everything around, breaking through the translucent curtains from within. Again a second of confusion, a flash and he was already there, behind the curtain. Only now did he notice that he was soaked to the skin, that his knee hurt, and that he had finally reached the place where he had been striving, without knowing how he had gotten there. In an instant, all the events of those days flashed before him. His legs buckled, they ached from terrible fatigue.

–No! Not now! This is not the end! The Prince muttered faintly. "I must tell her the truth!"

Another person did not sleep that night.

First silence, then the ringing heavy blow of the first drop on the leaf. Silence. A drop slid across the sheet, and again a resounding blow on the marble. Flash. Another drop. Yet. Yet. The sky burst into a terrible peal of thunder. Headlight woke up. Silence. Another flash was reflected in her eyes. Thunder again. She shuddered. Silence. The rustle of leaves outside the window broke it, but only for a moment, and again the silence was jarring to the ear.

Farah rose from the bed and went to the curtains, she wanted to stand in the rain, listen to the sounds of the forest. The marble floor was cold, but without knowing why, she did not walk on the carpet. The marble pleasantly cooled her feet and calmed her down. However, she had a thoughtful face, she looked ahead, but as if through everything and just walked. It seemed to her that she was falling asleep. A sudden gust of wind pulled up the curtains, a few drops of rain fell on her face. This made Faro instantly return to reality. She moved away from the curtains, an incomprehensible anxiety seized her. No, of course, she was no longer a little girl to be afraid of the dark or believe in some monsters, but the feeling of anxiety was clear. And for some reason, Farah felt that she should have been somewhere else. She turned back to the place where she

had slept a short time ago - everything was the same, but a certain feeling, or rather a premonition, tormented her.

She didn't even realize at once that she felt a touch, that there was someone else here. She looked through everything again. She turned. A peal of thunder swallowed her scream. But it was not the presence of a stranger that frightened her, but his appearance: wet, in dirty clothes, with wild eyes.

"Who are you?" And what are you doing here? Farah's fear was replaced by curiosity.

He dropped his hand from her shoulder. It became difficult for him to understand her language again.

"Don't be afraid," the Prince said soon. "I won't hurt you in any way!"

"An outsider," she thought. Only now did this word make at least some impression on her. Most likely, a few more seconds, and she would have screamed, calling for help. But then the Prince drew his dagger. And immediately - not a shadow of fear in her eyes, only surprise.

"It belongs..." the Prince did not have time to finish when he heard the voice of this surprise:

"Where did you get it?!" It must be in the treasury of my...

"I know," he cut Farah off in mid-sentence. "And he'll be there again very soon." Promise me he'll stay there forever!"

- ... father..." she finished her words by inertia.

There was a short pause.

"But from where?" How? Farah's exclamation of amazement echoed from the marble walls.

A flash of lightning cast two shadows on the wall. The two shadows, individually, are far apart. A second of silence.

"There is a time for everything, soon you will understand everything," he whispered.

And again everything was drowned out by the peal of thunder. Silence. Her eyes. An endless moment. Not a single sound, not a single sigh. Another second, another step, and everything will rush at breakneck speed. As if a drop that slid along the leaf to the very edge, stretched, froze for a moment and fell off, hitting the water surface with a sonorous sound, destroying all illusions about a quiet life, about silence, about peace.

And he began to tell. Everything - from the beginning to ... No, it couldn't be the end, when nothing had begun yet. The arrow has not yet been fired into the air, Farah's father is alive. For a second, he even thought - he imagined what it would be like to tell all these events. There were more of them in one day than there can be in all a lifetime.

- Many people think that Time is a river that carries its waters in one direction. But I can assure you that they are mistaken," the Prince began his story. Farah just listened.

"Time is an ocean embraced by a storm, it is a powerful and indomitable element. I have seen the true face of the times, and I can tell you a story the likes of which you have never heard before! The Prince continued.

And he talked almost until the morning. He tried his best not to show his feelings for Farah, so as not to scare her away. He did not see how sometimes a smile flashed on her face. Of course, she couldn't easily believe everything the stranger said. But he told it so beautifully and coherently that it all reminded her of a fairy tale that was pleasant to listen to. The story seemed unimaginable, ridiculous, implausible to her, but he had a dagger, and it seemed that he knew more than a mere stranger should know.

When the Prince had finished his story, he stood up and said:

"We must prevent the vizier!" He is going to secretly open the gate and release a signal arrow.

And he motioned for her to follow him. She was about to follow him when she heard someone coughing.

"Well, well!" A Persian soldier, thirsting for honor and glory, made his way into the palace of Maharajah! Stole his daughter and dagger! The vizier suddenly appeared. "I don't think you have a choice: either I'll call the guards right away and you'll regret getting here, or you'll give me the dagger!" He pronounced the last words with a special note in his voice - with a note of malicious reverie.

Farah listened and did not understand.

-What are we waiting for? Leave the girl! I'll arrange it so that you run away from here alive, I'll get the dagger, and she," Amar furrowed his brows and looked at Farah witheringly, "she already knows too much. She will be killed by me! But no one will know! A Persian soldier snuck into Farah's chambers, killed her, and reached the treasury - the missing dagger would be a great proof of that! And in the morning the arrow will be shot into the air and no one will care about such trifles!

Poor Farah... Her mind was clouded, there were tears, incomprehension, fear in her eyes. She walked a few steps away. The vizier is a traitor. Who is the night guest? What will he say? Had he deceived her?

"You can kill her yourself!" I won't mind! said the vizier. His eyes were terrible, the devil himself sat in them, nothing human, a huge emptiness, cold and terrible.

The headlight froze from these words and from these eyes.

The prince reached for his belt, and there was a cold sound of a sword sliding along the scabbard. Farah shuddered and stepped back

again, and sighed sharply from surprise - she bumped her back against the wall. He took out his sword, turned it around in his hands, his gaze cold and impenetrable, and no one would have dared to say exactly what he was going to do next. Silence. Silent waiting. The whistle of the air cut by the sword. Farah screamed. The vizier, breathing heavily, sank to the floor - the sword struck the chest, but hit the locket and therefore did not drop a drop of blood. Only a dull thud was heard. The last one for the vizier. He coughed, spat blood, muttered something indistinctly and died. Without realizing it, the Prince made it seem as if his enemy had died of natural causes, from an illness that had tormented him mercilessly for a long time.

She was not mistaken about it. He disturbed her peace, but it seems that he just saved her life. And maybe even the whole city.

A cool breeze blew in through the window. It heralded the imminent dawn. The leaves of some plant echoed the breeze, swayed after it and whispered something. Headlight walked past without noticing any of it. She was lost in thought, except that she felt that it was easier for her to breathe - the air after the thunderstorm tasted unusually sweet. The silence lasted about a minute.

A distant lonely ray of the rising sun broke through a crack in the curtains, blown by the same pre-dawn breeze. He didn't just light up everything around him. It seemed that he was beating with all his might, alone he was able to break through the veil of night, which was slowly going somewhere far away, away from this world. Another ray. He smoothly slid from the balcony itself along the floor, along the wall. Another ray. One more thing. A million rays. Dawn. The whole room was filled with glitter, glare, small flashes and warmth.

"So it's true... He was a traitor! she said.

"It's time! It's time!" - contrary to his wishes, the Prince rushed out of there, towards dawn and pain. He knew what awaited him there - he would not be able to control himself, his feelings, he would howl like a wild beast and curse everything in the world.

He looked at Farah. He was so used to looking into those eyes, looking for an answer in them, understanding... And he did not see what he was waiting for. For her, it was almost a game, a simple joke. He had lost that Farah, now he understood it completely, he did not resign himself, but he understood. He looked into her eyes for the last time - they were wide open in surprise, you could read a lot of questions in them, but no feelings.

"I have to go," the Prince said.

"Strange," she thought, "he came and went. Like a flash of lightning. I cut my whole life into *before* and *after*."

After standing hesitantly, she followed him. Her legs did not obey her. So much happened in less than one night! Now her heart

was beating so that it could echo the recent peals of thunder, but the storm was over, and the elements had already receded.

"She doesn't remember me! He doesn't know anything about me. She is everything to me, I am nothing to her. A mysterious night guest. Time will pass, and Farah will not even remember this incident!" - as if heavy stones fell on the Prince of thoughts. It became difficult for him to walk: his aching knee was making itself felt.

-What happened? She asked, raising her eyebrows slightly.

The prince did not answer, nothing changed in his face, in his eyes, but not because there was nothing to change. Everything froze - time, thoughts and the Prince himself. Calm in the whole ocean.

-Hold on. Return it to your father's treasury and guard it well! The Prince said, turning to her and handing her a dagger. But his heart called him to leave as soon as possible. And he went to the edge of the balcony, to the forest, to the camp... to his father.

"I'm so grateful to you, you—" Farah began to speak, but he motioned her to silence. Every word she said was like a blow of terrible force to him, he couldn't stand it for long.

However, Farah did not stop and after a few seconds continued:

"Tell me, why did you invent such a fantastic story?" Do you think I'm a child and would believe such nonsense?

The prince realized that he could no longer restrain himself. He should at least try. And with one quick movement he kissed Farah. Her eyes widened with indignation, she pushed the Prince away, and he finally understood. Time is an enemy that it has not been able to defeat. He will have to surrender. And he used the dagger for the last time to go back for only ten seconds, when Farah finished her words:

- ... A fantastic story? Do you think I'm a child and would believe such nonsense?

The prince paused for a moment, took a deep breath, and handed Farah a dagger, saying:

-Yes. You are right. It's just a fairy tale. Adieu! He put on a mask of cheerful indifference and jumped from the balcony onto the tall tree he was about to climb down.

-Wait! Who are you? At least tell me your name! She could not speak calmly, seeing that he was leaving. No, she didn't need him, but he raised so many questions that she felt dizzy, her temples pounded, and her thoughts refused to obey her completely.

"Just call me," the Prince replied, and a moment later he added, "Cocclucchia!"

2005-2016